

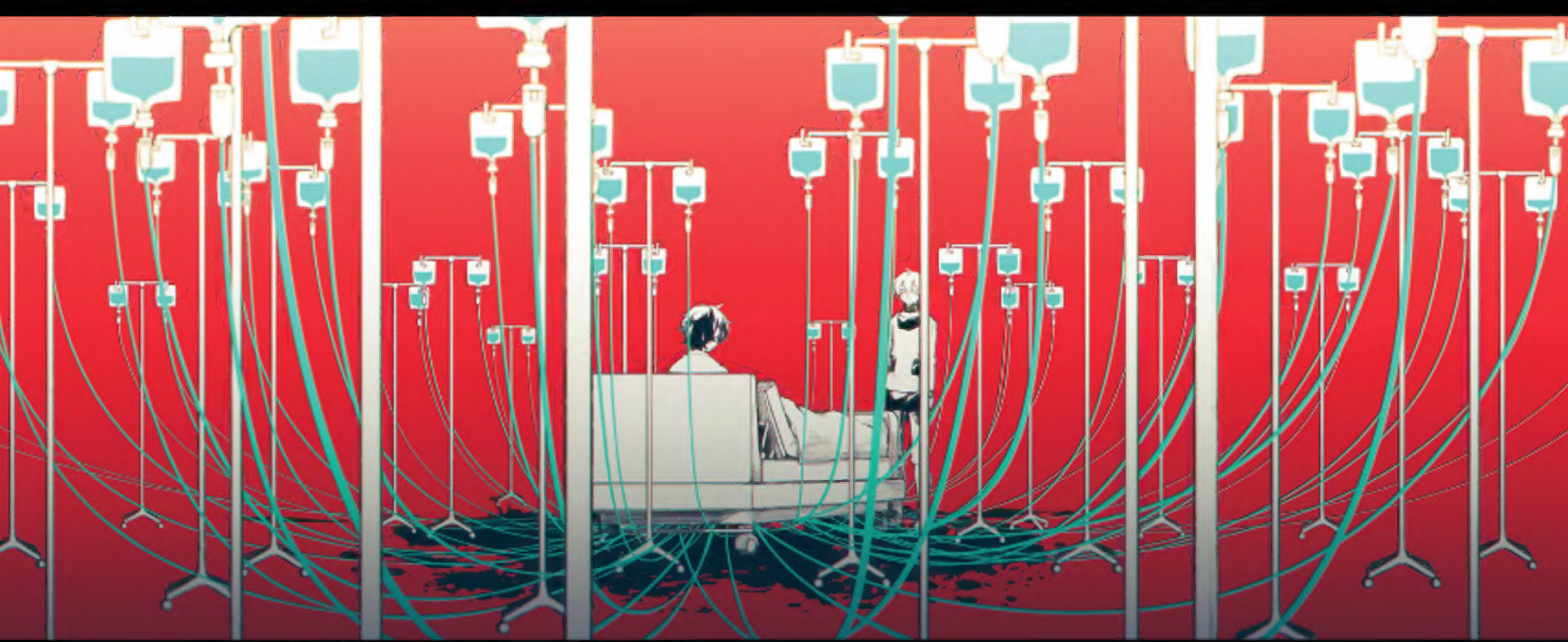
JIN (SHIZEN NO TEKI-P)

ILLUSTRATION BY SIDU

— OVER THE
DIMENSION —

カゲロウプロジェクト





KAGEROU DAZE

VOLUME 6: **OVER THE DIMENSION**

JIN (SHIZEN NO TEKI-P)

ILLUSTRATED BY SIDU



NEW YORK

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DAZE1

“Why am I even watching TV right now?”

I found myself muttering the question to no one in particular as I sat before the analog television.

My mind didn’t feel particularly foggy. I had no memory of falling asleep, and I didn’t think I’d fainted or anything like that, either.

...Wait a minute. I didn’t actually remember *anything at all*.

What was I doing here? And why was I staring at this TV? For whatever reason, I found it completely impossible to recall.

Not only did I fail to remember a single thing about the program I’d supposedly been watching, but there really was nothing in memory, right up to the moment I’d opened my mouth to speak. It was like someone was operating a conveyor belt into my brain, ferrying out the memories before I could even hold on to them.

I focused my distracted mind back on the TV. Lines of text flowed up the screen like credits at the end of a movie, accompanied by the graceful yet warped melody of a violin.

So had I been watching some kind of film, then?

...That struck me as pretty unlikely. Movies were never something I’d been particularly interested in. The most recent ones I could remember at all were the movie versions of that “cute fighting girl” anime that aired on Sunday mornings. But picturing myself staring blankly at movie credits, for who knows how long, was difficult to imagine. No matter how much free time I had in my life—and trust me, I had a lot—this struck me as an incredible waste of it.



If what I'd been viewing had credits, then, it must have had some kind of, you know...*film*, too. And I must have watched for whatever x number of minutes came before, but...what was it I'd watched?

"Geez, I can't remember anything. Like, where am I, even...?"

Yeah. Good point, self. Better figure that out first. Is there anything here I can use to help me get my bearings? Some kind of building, or window, or person? Hopefully looking for something like that won't take me away from my room for too long.

That was what crossed my mind as I swiveled my head around, trying to take in my surroundings—

—only to find them completely beyond belief.

"You have got to be kidding me."

Stretching out for what must have been hundreds of miles...was a world of pure white. It was impossible to figure out how far it went.

There were no people, no buildings—not even a single dead twig. Nothing to delineate the ground from the sky, and certainly nothing like a sun or moon. Not even my own shadow.

Except for the weather-beaten old TV, everything in front, behind, above, below—*everything* I could see—was a single, uniform shade of white.

It was a mercilessly surreal sight—and it left me quivering.

I recalled darkness terrifying me as a kid. This whiteness was the total opposite, but it still had the exact same effect on my psyche. Maybe worse.

At least in the dark, I could imagine something good existing out there, some hidden hope to cling to. A sense of expectation. I just couldn't see it, was all.

Here, however—there was nothing. This clear, white sort of nothingness made hope seem impossible.

My mind was buried in despair, failing to find any footing at all to explain this state of affairs. I had no recollection of coming here, and not a single living creature was anywhere nearby. Even if I tried journeying off, there weren't any distant landmarks to aim for. All I saw was a constant white, white, *white*—projecting nothing but cruel, uncaring doom.

What was *up* with this? Could someone even *make* a place so enormous, so beyond comprehension? No way. It just wasn't possible.

But as far as I could tell, nothing about this was a “creation” at all. It was simply a vast empty space, devoid of anything natural or even artificial. I could think of just one explanation, which was that I...

“Ah, crap! That *really* better not be it...!”

My voice trembled as I attempted to bring my racing mind to a halt.

No. There's no point trying to think rationally about such a surreal world.

What good would it do? I'd never find an answer.

For now, I need to start searching. There's got to be something, somewhere, I can grab on to that'll offer a hint toward escape. But is there anything? Anything at all? How do I get out of this bizarro land? No, there's got to be a clue around here somewhere...

The first thing I latched on to, of course, was the analog TV plopped in front of me.

The only hope I really had to go on in this place was that television. Which didn't matter to me. My mind thirsted for information, no matter how ridiculous. With a weary sense of expectation, I turned my eyes toward the screen—and found my hopes dashed by what could only be described as despair in textual form.

“What the hell language is this...?”

The credits scrolling up the screen were composed of an erratic mishmash of word strings, as if someone took languages from a handful of regions, ran them through a food processor, and posted the results. I tried my best to read it, focusing all my mental capacity on the effort. But there was nothing consistent or regular about any of it. I had at least a little bit of confidence when it came to languages, but this offered nothing to go on.

I heaved a mighty sigh and took a seat on what I supposed was the ground.

Looking around again, I still saw no people. Nothing besides that TV set.

The last memory I could recall was being in my room, messing around on my computer. Was that correct? It was all I could conjure up, and even that was hazy. Regardless, I definitely hadn't gone outside.

This TV with the end credits...What's it supposed to even mean?

Looking at the screen made me feel, gradually, that I really had watched...*something* here. Something with actual meaning.

Parts of it had made me laugh, I thought, and other parts were more solemn, almost melancholy. These were the sorts of tiny fragments of recall that popped into my head—then disappeared just as quickly.

Right. No doubt about it, though. I'd watched the...whatever it was these credits were for.

But there was something about that "whatever"...

For reasons beyond understanding, I couldn't remember any of its core aspects, as if it were enshrouded in fog. *Why am I forgetting the most important thing here?*

"Was it...like, something I don't *want* to remember?"

The moment I said the thought aloud, I found some words among the gobbledygook on-screen that I could finally decipher. I hurriedly ran up to the TV, gluing my eyes to the screen so I wouldn't miss them. My first

sliver of hope. I instinctively read them out:

“Let’s see...‘Starring...Shintaro...Kisaragi’?”

In all my life, I had never run into anyone with the same name. Even if I had, no way this mystery person would pop up right now. Not with *this* kind of timing.

There was no mistaking it. The star of the show was listed under...my name.

So was I playing the lead or something? *Yeah, right. I’ve never been anywhere near a movie set, much less starred in one.*

Maybe something besides a movie, then? But what else would have full-on credits like this? Televised theater productions, TV dramas, anime... Nothing I remembered signing up for, anyway. Besides, I doubted I had even a chance of starring in anything like that.

Yeah. This is insane. About the only thing I could ever star in is...my own life, pretty much.

My own...life...?

“...No.”

No. No, no. No!

That can’t be it. This is a dream. I’m just having a bad dream, is all! The weird chill coming across my body, the shortness of breath—it was just part of the nightmare. *Yeah. There’re no “closing credits” to my life. There can’t be...!*

“What the hell is this crap...? *Damn it!*”

I stood up and swiftly kicked the TV to tell it exactly what I thought of all this. My leg smashed home, strong enough that I should’ve easily broken a toe.

And yet...What’s the deal? It doesn’t hurt at all, and I’m not bleeding?

Okay. Now this was scary. I didn't get it at all. The anxiety was threatening to kill me. But despite all that...Why wasn't I crying?

What happened to me, anyway? Why can't I remember anything? Am I really "Shintaro Kisaragi" at all?

Please. Anyone. Just tell me.

What's going to happen to me now?

Am I just going to disappear?

Does this mean it's all over?

Or is this going to continue on and on to infinity? Is that how it's gonna be? Me, all alone, in this void forever...?

...Ugh. Anything but that. This is the worst dream ever.

I felt about ready to lose my mind. If this is a dream, then wake me up already...Hurry...

"...Calm down already, Shintaro."

...A voice.

The voice I heard out of nowhere caused the overworked circuits of my brain to freeze in place. Maybe the suddenness of it was too much of a surprise, but the real reason it stopped me so cold was because the owner of the voice was about the one person I'd least expect to be calling on me.

Following the voice, a shrill, electronic tone began to beep at regular intervals. It kept echoing a steady beeping rhythm with its cold, machine-generated tone. Something about it...*I know this*. This was the sound used on TV shows to represent someone's pulse.

Some kind of EKG...? I had heard it who knows how many times before. When my grandfather was admitted to the hospital. When my sister almost drowned in the sea. That, and one other time.

Lifting my head back up to attention, I found that a metallic door had appeared before me out of thin air, just a little bit ahead of me. There was no wall framing it—it was just a door, standing there amid nothing.

Whether I still had all my marbles deep down or my mind had finally decided to check out on me, I didn't really know—seeing this sight didn't generate any kind of shock or surprise.

I took a closer look at the door.

Did it lead to an operating room, perhaps? There was a red-light panel above the door that reminded me of the ones in hospitals that indicate surgeries in progress.

Between this and the voice I had just heard...

“...You want me to go in?”

...that was the only interpretation I could come to.

The voice from before was definitely familiar. There was no way, I

thought, it could be anyone besides the guy I was picturing.

If that was the case—as ironic as it’d be—this being a hospital OR door would suddenly make a lot of sense. But...was that kind of thing even possible?

I mean, if I could see him again, I’d love to. There was a lot we needed to talk about. For the past two years, I’d regretted not being able to listen to what he really had to say, or to tell him what I really wanted. What actually happened on that day two years ago? Why was I the only one left behind? The question ate at me constantly.

If this is my big chance to talk to him again...

“...Open up.”

The moment I whispered the words in front of the door, there was a loud click and the red light panel shut off. At the same time, the metal door opened soundlessly.

The first thing I noticed was the smell. That uniquely antiseptic smell that seems to pervade every corner of a hospital blew through the half-open door.

The next thing that entered my sight was a vast, almost uncountable number of IV drips, strewn all across the pure white space. The innumerable plastic lines were each linked to a separate bag filled with a colorless liquid, but the thin tubes snaking out from them extended inward toward a single, unseen point. They numbered in the dozens, the hundreds even, making them resemble a sort of haphazard spider’s web.

And at the terminus...was something I couldn’t see from the entrance. But judging by the direction that beeping came from, it must’ve been generated by whoever was on the other side.

No point moping around at the door. With a deep breath, I stepped through.

Grabbing at the IV drips, I waded my way through the maze, taking care not to tip any of them over as I took step after reluctant step. The more I advanced, the more powerful the antiseptic smell became. Attempting to pick my way through this endless, teeming mass of tubes was like attempting to bushwhack through a metallic jungle.

Clinking and clanking my way through, the destination at the end of this twisted tangle finally fell into sight.

Despite the fact that this was allegedly an operating room, there were no other medical devices visible apart from the IVs. Not a single doctor or nurse presided, either.

All I saw was a single bed, wrapped in white sheets that seemed to melt into the equally white backdrop.

Unexpectedly meeting the eyes of the patient in that bed, exactly the way I remembered him from before, made me gasp.

What are you doing here?

What's happened to you all this time?

Where are we, for that matter?

Am I here because you called me over?

...Despite the torrent of these and other questions that flashed across my mind, the one that reflexively made it to my lips was quite a bit more run-of-the-mill.

“How long has it been, Haruka?”

“...Um, a pretty long time, I guess, huh?”

Haruka Kokonose, a student in the year above me, sat up in bed, his voice just as soft as before.

...It should have never happened, but there he was—right there—awake.

“Um, I...uhh...”

My voice shuddered to a halt. Who could blame me? I didn't have a single breezy topic I could use for a casual chat with him. Haruka must have noticed because he was the next to speak:

"Kind of easy to get nervous after all this time, huh? I mean, I never even dreamed that we'd meet again like this."

"Oh! Y-you too, huh? I'm the same way."

Haruka replied with a quiet "Yeah," then lowered his eyes, his face betraying a bit of sadness.

...The silence came far too quickly. I couldn't guess how long it had been since I'd last spoken to anyone. My mind seemed to recall that I'd talked to my sister not long ago, but outside that, I didn't even have the slightest, fragmented memory of speaking to another human being.

That's the kind of guy I was. And it meant there was no way I could keep a conversation going all by myself.

"...Um. So! Like, there's a lot I wanna talk to you about! Like, where we are, and, and s-stuff...!"

As I expected, it came out far louder than I intended. At least my voice had the good sense not to bounce off the walls too much. Assuming there *were* any walls, which—now that I noticed—there weren't.

But Haruka didn't act surprised at all. Instead he looked down, a tad dejected.

"I guess you don't remember after all, huh? You haven't forgotten about...you know, *everybody*, have you?"

After all? Everybody? I had no recollection. Which "*everybody*" did he mean?

"Uhhh...I'm sorry, I don't think I really remember."

"No? Yeah, I bet...Well, where should I start?"

Haruka was acting like he knew something. I wanted to extract as much as I could out of him...or that was my intention, at least. But I couldn't will myself to push him along too much, either.

It was always that way. Haruka tended to run on his own pace. I

nicknamed it “Haruka Standard Time” in my mind, way back when. It never bothered me much.

“...You know, I...I always wanted to ask you about...yourself.”

Ugh. I’m worthless. I can barely even string a sentence together. People used to berate me all the time for how mean and off-putting I was to people, and now look at me. It’s like my tongue has atrophied from lack of use.

“Well, thanks,” Haruka said apologetically. “There’s actually something I need to come clear about, though. It’s kind of a long story, but...”

Then he began to tell a story about the past, one that took more time than I expected to get to its end.

His voice was just as clear as it was two years ago—on that summer when he died.

LOST DAYS · 1

Indian summer.

I swung a pen around my fingers idly as I stared listlessly at the afternoon schoolyard from my window-side seat. The faint colors of fall had begun to deepen, their shadows looming closer, turning the leaves on the deciduous trees across the front lawn into a dazzling shade of red.

Autumn is always the most colorful season of the year, and for that, I like it most of all.

The clear blue sky was marked here and there with fluffy, cotton candy-like white clouds, while the soft rays of sun peeking through no longer boasted their summer strength...

Where did summer go this year, anyway? It's like it was gone in the blink of an eye.

Every year, the question of exactly when summer ends has captivated me.

Some people consider it over in mid-August, at the end of the Obon holiday. Others hold out until the month comes to a close, to officially declare it a thing of the past. Still others, especially my age, peg it to whenever summer vacation ends, while others simply take a vague “whenever it gets colder” view of things. There are people who even tie it to when the cicadas stop screeching from their sentry posts in the trees.

Considering all these points people use to mark the end of summer, it seems sensible that everyone has their own definition of what summer really *is* in the first place.

I brooded on this: Even if some career politician stepped up to the podium and stated, “Summer hereby ends at *this* hour of *that* day in *this*

month,” it’d still depend on the weather, on local customs. It’d never go anywhere. Nobody would listen to that blowhard. I know for sure I wouldn’t.

So what does summer actually mean to me, then? I didn’t get much of a chance to go out during this one, either. Something about the season just never seems to click with me.

It’d be nice if I could go out and have a little more fun next summer, though. Maybe to the seashore or something. With friends.

Or camping would be nice, too. I don’t like the feel of bugs buzzing around me, but if we all whipped up some curry and rice around the fire, I bet it’d taste really special.

If I could just really bust loose and take in everything summer’s got to offer...maybe that’d help me find it. My own “summer.”

Next year, huh...? Kinda far away.

...Ah well. Let’s just not think about it.

I mean, come on. I’ve got other stuff I gotta think about anyway. Besides, it’s already three in the afternoon...

Wait. Three?

...Huhhh?! Three p.m. already?! Oh crap—what am I gonna do? Sixth period’s about to end! Ugh. I haven’t gotten anywhere with this...! All right. All right. Just calm down, and...

“So did you draw some enemies for us yet? Something that’ll feel really good to mow down?!”

“Uh...”

The quiet science storage room was suddenly rattled by a blunt voice. Rattled was the right term for it—it was pretty loud. What was the deal with that? We were supposed to be in the middle of class, too.

As I pondered this, I turned to the teacher’s desk to find my homeroom instructor, Mr. Tateyama, slumped over it, snoring with all his might. About

what I'd figured, really.

But considering our class consisted of exactly two students, that meant only one thing: There was just a single outlet left for her whining and carrying on.

Resigning myself to my fate, I turned toward the voice. The girl sitting beside me, her black hair done up in pigtails, returned my gaze with a mischievous smile.

Her somewhat almond-shaped eyes were accompanied by some fairly dark circles along the bottom. I could faintly hear rock music spilling out of the headphones around her neck.

Takane Enomoto. My one and only classmate.

I called her my "classmate," but the nitty-gritty behind that was actually a little complex. Technically, I was supposed to be in the Class E homeroom, and Takane should have been in Class B. We shouldn't have attended any of the same classes at all. But here we were, our desks pushed together—all because we both had a certain "illness," and because this was "special education."

Takane had a rare disease that apparently caused her to fall asleep instantly, without warning. Whatever it was, it was serious enough to get her reassigned to this class. Not that she ever really mentioned it, and not that I ever bothered asking her about it point-blank, so that was pretty much all I knew.

But with a face as mischievous as Takane's, I knew what came next. That face emerged only when she found a weak point—some soft piece of exposed flesh she could stab at.

I knew because I had a fairly decent idea of what my weak point was. Takane, perhaps sensing the panic unfolding within my head, prodded me for an answer.

"Hey, y'know, I'm *pretty* sure you said you'd draw up the enemy graphics today, right? How's that coming along? Don't tell me you haven't drawn *anything*, now."

I took my eyes away from her impish gaze and stared at the drawing paper in my hands. It contained none of the “enemies” she requested, nor any other evidence that I had even touched a pencil to it yet.

And why would it? I had no memory of drawing anything in the first place. If there was some artwork down there, I would’ve been the most surprised of all.

“Ummmm...Well, not too much yet, I guess. Ha-ha...”

I tried flipping the paper over as I gave that wishy-washy reply. I was late by a country mile. Takane craned her neck over, gave the paper a good once-over, then snorted at me.

“Pft. So ‘not too much’ means absolutely nothing in your vocabulary, huh? I’ll keep that in mind for the future.”

There was something theatrical about the act, almost. She sat back down in her seat and yawned like a sleepy grizzly bear, the word “restraint” clearly absent from her own.

“This is so ridiculous,” she muttered.

Her act of dominance was as practiced as it was devastating to my psyche. I had no confidence in myself to start with, but even if I did, I think it would’ve just been blown to smithereens.

Not even that was the full brunt of her abuse, however. I could only wish she’d leave it at that, but, of course, I figured this girl wasn’t having any of it. She’d probably say something to me again shortly. *Nah, no “probably” about it. She totally would. Had Takane ever ended it with just one withering observation like that? No. Never.*

I tensed up, expecting the inevitable. Unsurprisingly, she soon had another question:

“Hey, could you remind me who it was who was all like, ‘Oooh, I’d kinda like to run a shooting gallery’ just a bit ago?”

“That was...uh, me, right?”

“Sure was! And now there’s only a week until the school festival. Are we still on the same page here?”

“Y-yeah...but...”

“Okay, so why are you just staring out the window instead of working? What are you, stupid?”

The twin-pronged tongue-lashing still wasn't as sharply honed as what she was *truly* capable of. I really wished she'd stop throwing around words like “stupid” and “dumbass” all the time. It wasn't nice, using them on people. You'd think she'd be more aware of that, being a girl and everything. *I mean, if that becomes a habit of hers, what's gonna happen when it's time for her to get married?*

...A shame I was incapable of saying this to her face. Instead, I merely groaned a little in reply. It was nothing Takane was willing to forgive.

“So, Haruka, you got anything to say in your defense?”

“...I was just spacing out a little. I'm sorry.”

One week left until our first school festival. This was starting to look bleak.

Our school's festival had a fair amount of history to it. Around the local area, apparently, it was a pretty well-known event. Or so I was told. The school sunk a lot of effort into it each year, too. I was a bit surprised when they held this peppy kind of “Stand Up and Help Your School Festival” assembly on the day the construction for the festival began.

All this was in part because last year, the school managed to host a rock concert headlined by the kind of band you or I actually had a decent chance of knowing. It was a riot, I heard. Takane was a fan of theirs, even, and she paid for her own concert ticket as a nonstudent at the time. Whether that motivated her to join our school or not, I couldn't say.

And now we were halfway done with the festival construction period. Each class had their fourth, fifth, and sixth periods free to use for whatever they liked during these two weeks, so once lunch was over, the halls came alive with students prepping food stalls or other structures. The final week before the festival saw a lot of courses either cease entirely or put in only a token effort, freeing most classes to devote their entire school day to festival work.

Most *normal* classes, anyway.

Since ours was placed in somewhat different circumstances, it was up to us as individuals whether we joined things like the festival or the school track meet. That was out of consideration for our health issues, of course, but as students, we weren't exactly the most eager of participants in school events anyway. There was no way we'd proactively try to join in this event, either. It barely even registered in Takane's mind at first, and when she said "I *really* don't want to run a stall," I figured that was the end of it right there.

The expectation from me, at least, was that it'd be business as usual in our class—that we didn't have to worry about prepping for any kind of festival at all. That was the initial plan, at least. I figured our main concerns would be what order we'd visit all the stalls in, or how many servings I'd allow myself from each of the food sellers.

Until yesterday morning, anyway, I had no plans at all of being suddenly forced into constructing a rickety stall out of plywood and finding some kind of cheap dish I could sell at a huge markup.

"Well, I guess I can't blame only you for this," Takane reluctantly offered. "It's really our teacher's fault, you know? Coming up with all this outta nowhere."

She whipped her finger at Mr. Tateyama, still sprawled out over his desk.

Something in me wanted to say, "I know it's called a pointer finger, but you don't have to point *that* hard at him," but I shut it down with a wry smile.

That's because, by and large, I agreed with Takane. The reason we had to come up with something on such short notice mostly had to do with a little bit of sucking up Mr. Tateyama did the other day.

"Ugh! Why do we have to put up with Mr. Tateyama trying to earn a bunch of brownie points for himself? Just because he wants to impress the administrator doesn't mean he had to say, 'Ooh, we're gonna knock your socks off!' Talk about raising the bar for no good reason. Like, if we haven't done anything to prep at all, don't go around acting like we're the

supreme gods of the universe!!”

Takane rattled her desk to emphasize her high-decibel rant. I felt the need to pacify her.

“Well, I dunno, I’m kind of looking forward to it. Besides, it’s sorta fun, working on it like this.”

The pouty expression on Takane’s face softened a bit. “Well... whatever,” she said, slumping over her own desk. “You’re the ones doing all the hard work.”

All the other classes were nearing the climax of their festival-display efforts. To be frank, starting this late in the game was insane. We were beyond short on time. Thinking about it rationally, there was no way we could knock anyone’s socks off. I wasn’t sure we could even cobble together the bare minimum for a display.

But just like Takane put it, if we were gonna do something, we didn’t want to half-ass it. It had to be the most exciting thing on school grounds. I couldn’t help but agree with her. I even caught myself saying “Of course.”

Amid all the competition we were going to have display-wise, I didn’t want something that looked like it was put together with thumbtacks and duct tape. If we were in this, we were going all the way.

Still, though...

“Still, though...Takane...”

“What?”

“Well, I mean...Creating a whole shooting game in the space of a week? That sounds kind of impossible.”

Takane had just spent half a minute complaining about the hurdles Mr. Tateyama put up for us. But the one *she* put up—the “most exciting thing” one—was higher than anything our teacher had.

He was probably sleeping off the all-nighter he just pulled, if I had to guess. Which seemed logical enough. No way we’d make the deadline

otherwise. After all, Mr. Tateyama had to program a complete shooting game, start to finish, in the course of a single week.

Even from my willfully ignorant “how hard could it be” perspective, this didn’t seem like an easy job. It was his fault for sucking up to his boss, pretty much, but I still felt kind of bad for him.

Takane, meanwhile, couldn’t have cared less.

“What’re you *talking* about? It was Mr. Tateyama who put us in this mess, remember? And *you* wanted to do the shooting gallery, right? It’s not like either of you guys are do-it-yourselfers, so making a video game’s just about all we got.”

Then she glared at me, like a dog trying to figure out why its master was dangling a set of keys in front of it.

I had to admit: She was right. I did say that. But we had no experience creating the kind of props a shooting gallery required, and in terms of personnel and budget, we were working with almost nothing.

A video game, on the other hand, seemed within our grasp. If we had some graphics and a programmer, it sounded possible, at least. Assuming we could stop time for a few months.

“But...look, if you’ve got time to whine about this crap, start drawing! The clock’s ticking!”

Takane clapped her hands a couple times to hurry me along. I hastily recalibrated the grip on my pen. Right. We really didn’t have time at all. After all, I had a quota of twenty enemy characters that’d appear in the game, and so far I had drawn exactly zero.

Two hours since one o’clock, and I still hadn’t done anything except stare at my drawing paper. If I couldn’t even draw *one* character, twenty before the end of the day was nothing but a pipe dream.

But...I just couldn’t.

I couldn’t draw.

It wasn’t that I was bad at drawing. I thought I did a pretty good job, actually, when it came to landscapes and things. But trying to come up with characters—or anything, really, that matched the “enemy” keyword I was working with—seemed to create a mental block.

All this self-targeted moaning and groaning drove an exasperated Takane to prod at me again.



“What, can’t you even draw *one* bad guy?”

“I guess I can’t, really. I don’t play games like these very much, so it’s kinda hard to picture what these enemies should look like.”

I tried to be honest with her, but Takane replied with a light sigh and a finger pointed straight at me.

“Look, it doesn’t *matter* what they look like. Just as long as it looks like it’d be fun to blow them away, anything’s fine. Games are all about relieving stress anyway, so the idea here’s to design characters to help with that. You get me?”

I didn’t get what was fun about blowing anyone away, but even a nongamer like me could see the logic in Takane’s explanation. Mr. Tateyama said she was some kind of whiz at 3-D shooters, and now I could believe it.

But I had no experience with shooting games, much less blowing things away. I had no way of figuring out what kind of foes would look ripe for filling with bullets.

“Hmm...So, like, what kind of enemies usually appear in these sorts of games?”

“Well, for example...in terms of some of the more popular shooters, I dunno...like, zombies?”

Zombies.

The mere word was enough to make me shudder. It made me recall this zombie-laden panic-horror film I saw on TV a while ago. *Man, that’d been scary. All these villagers, helpless against the mob of undead that crawled out of their graves and formed giant hordes...and then...*

“Uh, I-I’m sorry, Takane, but...something besides that would be nice...”

“Huh? What’s the big deal with zombies? You got a problem with them?”

“Not a problem, but...I mean, z-zombies don’t exist in real life, so it’s just kinda hard to imagine what they look like...and stuff.”

Takane raised an eyebrow at my pained attempt at self-defense, but not for long. Soon, she looked up, suddenly realizing something, and pointed a finger at me again.

“Well, why don’t you base them on animals and things? I mean, the monsters in video games are usually inspired by parts of animals and stuff.”

“Monster animals...? Hmm. Maybe I could do that.”

The concept reminded me of the anime on TV in the afternoons, the one with that kid and the monsters that flew out of the capsules he tossed around. I liked how the smaller ones would transform into bigger ones, or sometimes they’d combine together to form more complex monsters. I remembered being enamored by the show as a kid. In fact, didn’t I draw basically nothing but the creatures from that anime back then? Yeah. I came up with a few original beasts of my own, too.

...This could work. If she didn’t mind creatures like that being the enemies in this game, I could come up with some ideas. In fact, maybe twenty in a single afternoon wasn’t such a dream after all.

“Yeah...Thanks, Takane. I think I can make something out of this!”

I put my fist in the air. Takane snorted approvingly in response.

“Well, get to it! Can’t have any kinks ruin our festival, y’know.”

Our plan for the school festival was to create a sort of competitive shooting game. Instead of trying to reach a certain point total, challengers would try to amass a higher score than the class champion, i.e. Takane.

The reason we opted for these rules was because we had only one prize to give away—a single taxidermy specimen of a fish that Mr. Tateyama spent our entire festival budget on. With that in mind, if even a single challenger won, that would be the end of our event right there. It’d turn into an awkwardly gloomy school festival real quick if that ever happened.

This meant that we couldn’t afford to give away our prize until the very end of the festival. But if we set the requirements too high, the potential for customer complaints unnerved me.

That’s where Takane’s “competitive” idea came from. As she put it, “If a cute girl like me is their opponent, nobody’s gonna whine about losing *that*

much.” From a social aspect, she had a point, I supposed. That still meant it’d be all over if she lost, but Takane was so confident in her skills that, as long as she didn’t go easy on anyone, she’d never lose. So she claimed, anyway.

So, really, the atmosphere around the class right then was, more or less, “We could spend all day counting the things we’re freaking out about, but it’s not gonna help get them done.”

We had to make a shooting game in one week for the school festival. We had no time and very few people to work with. I thought it was ridiculous to even attempt it, but it was weird, how I felt about it all:

It totally thrilled me.

“Yeah...Let’s make this the best show we can, Takane.”

“Well, duh. That’s the only thing we *can* do.”

Takane grinned at me. I could feel my own lips doing the same.

“...Oh right,” she continued, clapping her hands suddenly. She’d clearly remembered something or other as she looked down at me. “What should we call this, anyway? You said you’d think about it yesterday.”

Oh. Yeah, I did. I forgot to tell her... I retrieved a file from my bag and handed Takane a single piece of drawing paper from it.

“Huh? What’s that—? Whoa! you drew a logo? Wow, you really *can* do stuff like this! Um, let’s see...”

I’d spent much of the previous night coming up with a suitable title, but now that I thought about it, Takane would be the first person to actually say it aloud.

How would it sound, coming out of her mouth? It kind of excited me.

Holding the paper straight up, the rock music still leaking out from around her neck, Takane gave it a try.

“...Headphone Actor.”



I suddenly noticed the sound of the second hand on the bedroom wall clock, forcing its way into the silence.

Looking up, I saw that it was one in the morning.

Must've nodded off for a bit...

I leaned against my seat's backrest and stretched my arms up. The chair, a new gift for this school year, creaked in response. Come to think of it, I had grown a little the last time I measured my height, hadn't I? Not that I need much more of it. Why did my body keep doing that, anyway? It made me stand out too much; I kept running into things... There was nothing at all good about it.

Shifting my weight from the backrest to the seat, I groggily rubbed my eyes, my vision blurring out as I did. My desk, lit up by a small lamp, had a nature encyclopedia taken from the shelf and a piece of drawing paper on it, littered with eraser shavings. In the center of it was Meowtarus, the last enemy I had finished drawing. Number nineteen.

"...Nice. Yeah, this works."

I really had to hand it to Takane, I suppose.

After all those hours spent hemming and hawing over character design, the simple suggestion to base them off animals was like tapping into the mother lode in my imagination. I figured I did a good job of reflecting the unique traits of each animal I picked for my rogue's gallery. They all seemed to come alive on my drawing paper, although that was probably just the pride of their creator coming to the surface.

As I worked, the whole process grew more and more fun. I could barely stop my hand from moving, it all went so well. I couldn't even guess how long it had been since I'd lost myself in drawing. It felt great.

"Well, one more, and that'll be twenty. Man, Takane's gonna go nuts once she sees how fast I'm going..."

She didn't look it, but you could actually excite her pretty easily. I salivated at the thought of what kind of reaction she'd have. Just imagining the look of shock on her face made my cheeks warm up a little. She had yet to give me so much as a compliment, but maybe this portfolio would change her mind a little.

Mulling this over filled me with creative juices despite the late hour. *Right. Time to tackle the last guy.* My breathing accelerated as I turned to the next page in the encyclopedia.

"...Huh. That's weird."

The page had stopped on a cow. I already covered that with "Heiferheave," number eleven, so that wasn't going to work. Did I skip a page when I wasn't paying attention? I turned the page again, but I already used the bear on that one for my "Bear-Rilla" hybrid (number three), so that wasn't going to work either.

...Hang on.

Struck by an eerie foreboding, I brought the encyclopedia closer and turned to the table of contents, scanning the list of animals running down the page. Dog, hawk, pig, turtle. Dahh! I knew it!

"Aw, man, I already referenced all the animals in here..."

Well, *that* was careless of me. I still had one monster to make, but I had used up all the animals in this book as a motif. Now what? I had already declared to myself that I was drawing twenty monsters before I stopped. I couldn't just say "Sorry, can't do it" now.

What's more, the final monster was supposed to be the last boss, so to speak. A creature stronger than any of the characters that came before it. I couldn't approach this the same way as the others.

Ugh. If I had known this was going to happen, I wouldn't have been so gung-ho about combining characteristics from different animals into each one. I mean, come on—Bear-Rilla? Why didn't I just stick with one or the other?

As my mind spiraled down this nonsensical pit of insecurity, I heard a

ringtone boom across the room. Turning, I saw my phone blinking from the middle of the bed. I hurried over to pick it up, taking another look at the wall clock. Still one a.m. Who'd be calling now?

I brought the phone to my ear, not bothering to check the number.

"Um, hello?"

"Oh, I figured you'd be awake. Sorry I'm calling so late."

It was Mr. Tateyama. He didn't sound too flustered, but there was still a bit of awkwardness to it. I sat down on the bed and stretched my legs a little to get comfortable.

"Oh, no, it's fine...but is something up?"

"Mm? Well, uh, just something about the school festival." He sounded evasive. "Something" about the festival? What? Before I could ask, he dove straight into his story. *"Hey, so I heard from Takane that you were working late last night on this, too, huh? So...uh, I just thought maybe you were pushing yourself hard again tonight."*

Oh. That sort of thing. I tried to sound as bright as possible in response.

"No, no, there's nothing hard about it. In fact, it's so much fun, it feels like my body's moving by itself."

It wasn't a lie, either. That was exactly how I wanted to describe how smoothly things were going. But I also knew that wasn't the main point of my teacher's question.

As expected, Mr. Tateyama continued, clearly having trouble finding the right words to frame his topic.

"Well, yeah, but there's no point destroying your body over this, y'know? If you wanna enjoy the day of the festival at all, it's important that you rest up when you—"

"...You really don't have to worry, Mr. Tateyama," I interrupted before he could finish. Instead of replying, my teacher gave a small sigh.

The silence continued for a moment, making the clock's second hand seem even louder than usual. The well-regulated rhythm of its *click, click, click* was a little creepy. I don't know how or when *that* got started, but it did.

Speaking of seconds, I managed to calculate it in the back of my mind once. I only had about 30 million seconds left. That made it sound like a long time, one would think, but it's weird how hard it was to estimate time lengths unless you actually experienced them for yourself.

Ugh. It's late. I couldn't keep him on the phone forever. I decided to just tell Mr. Tateyama point-blank what I wanted to say.

"I mean, whether I rest or not, I've got one year to go before I die."

My illness certainly liked sticking to a schedule, at least.

When it killed my mother, it apparently waited until the exact moment the doctors said it would in their diagnosis. And *they* said "one year," so I figured, hey, that's about what I had to look forward to, too. For now, at least, nothing about it made me whine or cry about my fate. I probably had my father to thank for that.

My father was a fairly offbeat kind of guy.

He worked at one research lab or another, and for as long as I knew, he always played life straight and narrow—no lying, no telling jokes, nothing like that. But it was still a huge shock when he came up to me, right around when I was ten, looked at me with a straight face, and said, "You're probably going to die six years from now."

We still lived together, the two of us, but my father was so busy with work that we rarely saw much of each other. So a live-in helper handled things like food and hospital trips for me instead.

That was about all I knew about my father, really, but from what I'd heard, my father had begun to turn a little..."odd," as people said, around the time my mother died.

Thinking over all those various things—sure, I'll admit it makes it sound like I've lived a pretty lonely life. I spent a lot of it by myself, and there's still a lot I'm totally incapable of.

I had more than my fair share of middle-aged women I'd never met before shed tears and say things like "you poor, poor child," so I imagined that was probably what most people thought about me.

But really, I didn't think my life was all that bad.

Lately, especially, there'd been a lot more to enjoy about school. There were things I actually wanted to do now.

Talking about how I had x months to live or whatever...Look, you could die in a car accident tomorrow, for all anyone knew. There was never a guarantee that you'd live out your natural lifespan.

It was just that...something about the sound of "one year to go" really hit home for me. It meant that this upcoming school festival would also serve as my *last* student festival.

I didn't think there was any point in volunteering to run this shooting-game thing if there was a chance we couldn't do it. Now, though, we actually *did* have a chance.

"So, you know, I really wanna work hard for this festival."

Mr. Tateyama groaned wearily in response. It wasn't the kind of thing he could've just shrugged off with, "Ooh, that's rough. Hang in there, kiddo" or whatever. How could he? If I were him, I'd probably have trouble responding to that, too. *Sorry to put you in the hot seat like this, I guess.*

But Mr. Tateyama never scolded me or said "Just *deal* with it" or anything. I think I had a good idea why he didn't, too.

"...Mr. Tateyama, you said you were trying to look all gung ho around the administrator. That was kind of a lie, wasn't it?"

My teacher didn't respond. So I continued.

"You had to say that to motivate Takane to take action, didn't you? And if she wasn't on board, I would've just said 'Forget about it' so I wouldn't rock the boat. You created that whole setup on purpose, didn't you?"

I'd actually spotted Mr. Tateyama speaking to the school administrator in the hallway once. How would I describe the conversation? It was...grim. Stormy. The administrator was a no-nonsense, results-oriented kind of guy, apparently, and he was spouting off buzzwords like "advancement rate" and

“applicant appeal” and so on like a machine gun. Mr. Tateyama had withstood this barrage silently before replying with two or three clearly hostile parting words and storming off.

That whole episode made it hard to imagine Mr. Tateyama bowing his head at the administrator, trying to curry his favor all of a sudden.

Takane liked trashing his good name now and again, but Mr. Tateyama was a nice teacher. He looked out for us. The whole reason I made it into this school was because my father was an old acquaintance of his, and when it came down to it, he was the only grown-up I was able to discuss my problems with.

Whether it was actually true or not, the only thing I could picture was that Mr. Tateyama had deliberately tried to create a situation where Takane and I worked together to join the school festival.

“Besides, it takes a lot of money to make a game,” I said. “Like, a lot more than our budget would’ve allowed even if you didn’t spend it all beforehand. You aren’t blowing a ton of money on this for our sakes, are you?”

Mr. Tateyama laughed. *“Hey, I’m not as charitable a guy as you apparently think. Also, I really did try to impress the administrator. He’s got such a stick up his ass about our class, I just couldn’t help myself any longer.”*

“Ha-ha-ha...Now, *that* I can imagine. But Mr. Tateyama, if you’re putting it that way...”

My pressing him for an answer apparently convinced Mr. Tateyama that the jig was up. After a pause, he began to speak.

“Well, yeah, what’d you think it was? There ain’t a teacher out there with at least some kind of expectations for his students...’Course, like it or not, we got only a week to work with. I hope you’re ready to give this the best shot we can, Haruka.”

“...I’ll do what I can!”

“Give it our best shot”—I liked that term. It felt awfully close to “Keep on living,” in my mind. I suppose I knew already that I couldn’t accomplish

all that much in a year's time. There wasn't any world travel on my schedule, and I was too young to get married anyway.

But moreover, the idea that I could reach some sort of present goal if I just applied myself enough felt like more of a blessing than anything else in my life.

"Right...Whoa, it's already one, huh? You going to bed now?"

"Um, yeah...I guess I oughta. I was up late last night, too, and I'm startin' to lose steam pretty fast..."

Then I remembered.

Wait a second. I need an idea for my twentieth character.

I still hadn't thought up anything useful.

Keeping the phone to my ear, I stood up and looked at my desk. I couldn't rely on that nature encyclopedia any longer. What else could I find for inspiration...?

"...Oh!"

An idea struck me that made me exclaim aloud. *"Whoa,"* responded a startled Mr. Tateyama. *"I thought you were conking out on me! Something going on?"*

Riiiiight. Mr. Tateyama might just have it, actually. In fact, he must have. That was part of his job. But I don't know...Would he get angry at me?

Well, might as well ask.

"Um, could I ask you a favor, maybe?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"Do you have a picture of Takane I could borrow?"

LOST DAYS · 2

It had been about ten minutes since I began walking down the footpath, which was laden with a colorful array of red and yellow leaves. The feel of them crunching under every step was nicely refreshing.

I pulled along a fairly hefty overnight bag, but between the leaves and the pleasant weather, I couldn't have felt better, in both mind and body.

It was a pleasant off-day, but I wasn't making my way to some kind of spa or idyllic resort. I was barely passing by anyone, in fact. In a neighborhood as quiet as this one, most of the people I did spot were well into their golden years. Giving each one of them a friendly nod, I dodged an advancing baby stroller as I proceeded on toward Mr. Tateyama's house.

We had only six days until the school festival, and I had agreed to stay over at Mr. Tateyama's place as a sort of impromptu "crunch time" session.

The reasoning was simple. My teacher had the computer and accessories needed to scan, color, and edit the graphics for the game.

Mr. Tateyama mentioned he used to make "indie" games during some long-forgotten point in the past, and either way, I could never afford all the equipment to work on this. So I was borrowing it—but I couldn't exactly lug that stuff back home with me, and it'd be rude anyway.

Once we started talking about Takane's photograph, we wound up getting sidetracked into all kinds of other topics. Eventually our plans escalated enough to warrant a work sleepover.

"Umm, turn right at the post office..."

Rounding the corner at a small post office as my teacher instructed, I was greeted by the full force of the autumn sun, previously blocked by the trees that lined the footpath. It was fall, but if I kept walking in this direct sunlight, it might just be enough to give me a tan. Not that I'd mind. I always wanted a little more color on my skin, but I never had much of a

chance to work on it.

The rolling wheels on my bag rattled as I kept going, eventually reaching the park Mr. Tateyama told me to watch for. Peeking over the low fence that surrounded it—amid the sandbox, the slide, the swings, and the rest of the playground equipment—I found a set of gymnastics bars with supports shaped like gorillas.

The cuddly, lovable Bear-Rilla I created last night flashed into my mind. Once this festival was over, what was I even gonna *do* with all these characters? I'd have to think about that. After all the love I poured into them, it seemed a little sad for them to be forgotten without seeing the light of day again. Maybe I could make some character buttons out of their likeness and pass them around at school. That could work.

Saying my goodbyes to the gorilla bars, I turned back toward the sidewalk. According to the directions I had, Mr. Tateyama's house faced this park. I would've stopped to gain my bearings, but there were so few people around that I kept going as I sized up the homes around me.

He described his house in word form only, but when I found it, there was no mistaking it. It *had* to be the place.

"...Yeah, this is the only red brick house here, anyway."

Checking the nameplate by the gate, I saw that it read TATEYAMA. Without skipping a beat, I pushed the doorbell next to the front door. An electronic *ding-dong* played. I always had trouble with moments like these. It was so rare for me to visit other people's houses that I couldn't help but fidget around, my body looking for some kind of release from the tension in the air.

But as I waited ten seconds...twenty seconds...thirty seconds, I didn't get the impression anyone was coming to open the door.

That's weird. I'm pretty sure he told me the other night that he'd be late with some meetings, but that his daughter would come out to greet me instead.

It seemed rude of me, but I chanced a peek through one of the front windows. It'd be one thing if the curtains were drawn, but if they weren't, maybe I could see what was going on inside. Of course, as sunny as it was outside, I doubted I'd see much of anything through the glare.

From my vantage point, I could see three windows upstairs, and on the first floor...

...Someone's there.

At the window on the far right of the first floor, there was a figure, one resembling a young girl with long hair. She was staring straight at me.

How long had she been looking at me? She had to be aware I was here, but she wasn't moving an inch.

"Ah...Ahhhhhh!"

When I realized this, I screamed like I was in a horror-film scene and found myself falling right on my rear end. As the pain from my hips registered in my head, my panicked brain began to conjure up all kinds of horrifying scenarios. *Who was that girl? Mr. Tateyama's daughter? How come she didn't answer the door, then? What's with her?! Ooh, but she is his daughter. I've got to at least say hello to her. I can't just sit here in front of his house forever. I should probably get up, at least...*

"...Whoa! She's gone!"

I had only taken my eyes off the window for a moment, right when I lost my balance. It couldn't have even been a second. That was all it took for the frozen silhouette of the girl by the window to vanish without a trace. I could feel something shuddering in my chest, a sense of fear different from the jump scare before.

Then I felt something vibrating in my pocket.

"Aaaaagghhh!!"

My senses were already on edge, so this little bout of whirring around

my waist was all it took for me to scream once more. In terms of volume, it might've been even louder than before. The subsequent realization that it was my cell phone made me unbearably embarrassed. *I really have to apologize to the neighbors for acting like such a freak.*

Checking the phone, I found a text from Mr. Tateyama waiting. Was he worried that I couldn't find the place? Well, perfect. Now I could ask him why nobody was answering the door.

I opened up the text, eagerly expecting some guidance on all this, but the content made me freeze in shock.

"Just got a text from my daughter. I'm upstairs. The door's open, so come on in."

...There was a lot I could have complained about here, but one overbearing question occupied my mind. *If his daughter noticed me, how come she didn't open the door?*

"...Does she hate me or something?"

Oh, come on. We haven't even met. That's silly. As I silently chided myself, I pulled my overnight bag along.

Turning back toward the window, I saw nobody on the other side. The natural conclusion was that I'd just had an encounter with Mr. Tateyama's daughter. I wasn't a fan of entering a house without someone showing me around, but if that was what he wanted from me, that was what he'd get.

Rattling my way up to the front door, I took a deep breath and opened it.

"Um, excuse me," I called out to no one in particular. "My name's Kokonose, and I'm one of Mr. Tateyama's students. Uhh...I'm coming in, okay?"

The inside of the house seemed a lot darker than the sun-bathed outdoors. I found a neat, well-furnished hallway extending before me. The word TOILET labeled a door to the side, and a stairway led upward. On the other side of the stairs was a door with a sign on it, leading to what I

guessed was a child's room. The door at the far end had a glass mosaic, which revealed the entrance to a brightly decorated living room.

I waited for a while in the foyer, but nobody seemed to be coming. In the text, Mr. Tateyama had said he was upstairs.

Might as well see what's going on up there.

I took off my shoes, picked up my bag, and pushed onward.

As I did, I began to realize exactly how attractive this place really was. If you'd logged as much time in the school's science storage room as I had, you'd know that "neatness" and "organization" were not Mr. Tateyama's strong suits. His wife and daughter must have put in a dedicated effort to keep things this clean. If they didn't—if this was all him—it really made me wish he cared about our classroom a little more.

I walked up to the door by the stairway and paused. It had a KID'S ROOM sign, just like I'd figured. I was a little surprised I'd guessed right on the first shot. Judging by the house's layout, the window that caught my attention earlier had to be in this room. Which meant *she* was, too.

I thought for a moment about saying something, but opted against it, figuring I shouldn't meddle. Then I climbed the stairs to the second floor. The hallway featured a large, stylishly decorated window and a much more wide-open floor plan than downstairs.

Looking around a little, I realized that out of the many doors around me, the one on the far end was open. My fingers were starting to go a bit numb from holding my bag, so I headed right over. Gaining my first view of the room, I was frozen with fascination.

"W-wow..."

It was a room of books.

Standing outside the door, I saw that the room, which had to be a good 250 square feet, was lined wall-to-wall with bookshelves, all filled to

bursting. From a variety of language dictionaries typically found in bookshops to thick, leather-bound volumes that looked like a demon could pop out if opened, all the way to sheaves of loose-leaf paper tied up with string, it had nearly anything a person could think of. The sight of these brightly colored books running from the floor to the ceiling like wallpaper was nothing short of awe inspiring.

I placed my bag on its side so the rollers wouldn't mark up the floor and stepped into the book room. After one step, the scent of ink hit my nostrils. My heart leaped at the sensation. It was like walking into some magical kingdom. It was the first time I had seen so many books, so densely packed together.

But the atmosphere of this room didn't exactly scream "Mr. Tateyama." My teacher would prefer a work space that was a little more...unkempt. Disorderly. Was this his wife's office? With all these books at hand, did she work in a scientific research capacity or something? Mr. Tateyama never talked about his family much, so I couldn't quite remember what her career was.

...Huh. Mr. Tateyama's wife. *What was she like*, I wondered.

I stood there, pondering this, when suddenly, darkness enshrouded the room.

Just as I exclaimed "Huh?" in surprise, a solid-sounding *ka-chunk* echoed across the room. For a moment, I failed to comprehend what happened, but it didn't take long to work it out. The door had just closed and locked.

"Am...am I stuck in here?!"

In a windowless room like this, simply closing the door was enough to plunge me into a world of darkness. Seeking a way out of this, I felt around with my hands, crawling across the floor. Without windows, it didn't seem likely that a gust of wind had blown the door shut. And it was *locked*, too. I hadn't spotted anyone in time, but someone must have done it deliberately.

I looked at my surroundings, still on all fours. I had to at least figure out where the door was if I was going to get anywhere. Swiveling my head around, I finally noticed just the faintest sliver of light coming through a slit in the doorway. The light source was so dim, however, that I couldn't figure out how far away it was. I didn't want to bash my head against the door, so—very gingerly—I made my way toward the light.

“S-somebody...!”

I tried calling for help, but failed to come up with a very loud voice. I was always this way, but whenever I needed to shout or otherwise make myself heard, I just was never up to the task.

Finally reaching the door, I knocked on it over and over again. There was no response.

I sighed, the door behind my back, and slumped to the floor.

Who did this? And why? I tried to at least pretend to think it over, but right now, only one potential suspect sprang to mind.

That girl. Mr. Tateyama's daughter.

I still had no idea why, but I must have done something to ruffle her feathers. I didn't mind her snubbing me earlier all that much, but to lock me in a room like this? That was kind of mean.

Besides, I didn't even know what I'd done wrong. Hating someone you've never even met struck me as kind of unfair. What was her motivation?

I sat there for a while, anguishing over the question, when I heard footsteps.

My body leaped up at the sudden visitor. *Who is it? I hope it's his wife, at least. I've got to get out of here!*

“Umm, excuse me!” I tried to shout. “Could you open this door?! I'm not an intruder or anything. Please!”

The footsteps immediately stopped. Then, as if turning in place, they

approached the book room I was in. It looked like I was getting out.

But what if it was his daughter? If she locked me in here, it'd be weird for her to just let me free again. So was it his wife? I didn't think she'd be home yet...

Suddenly, I heard the *ka-chunk* from before again. I leaped away from the door just in time as it opened inward, only to find myself face-to-face with a young girl in pajamas. She rubbed her eyes, as if just waking up, her long black hair going off in odd directions here and there. She didn't seem too much younger than I was. Was this his daughter after all?

"God, will you just shut *up*?! What're you going *on* about?! Besides, Dad said you shouldn't go into..."

The girl seemingly had every intention of chewing me out at first, but as she looked at me, she stopped, giving me an incredulous look.

"Uh, Shuu...ya...?"

"Sh-Shuuya...? What do you mean?"

I all but cowered under her menacing glare.

"Uh...", she responded, freezing in place.

So is this his daughter, or what...? It had to be, situationally speaking, but she didn't quite seem to match up with the girl at the window before. That girl was partially silhouetted, but between the hair length and the facial structure, she looked...different from this.





Plus, this girl...

“Um...did I wake you up?” I asked.

“I...,” the girl began, her face reddening. “I...ha-ha-ha...” Then, without warning, she ran off at full speed.

“Huh?! Hey, wait...What’re you doing?!”

Refusing to listen, the girl zoomed down the stairs with astonishing force.

I jumped out of the room, hoping to chase her, but I found myself stopped by a boy’s scream from downstairs.

A *boy’s* scream? Did Mr. Tateyama even have a son? I was growing rapidly unable to grasp all this. This girl, the one at the window, and a screaming boy...What was *up* with this house?

As I gradually fell into a panic, the girl from before climbed back upstairs, panting heavily. Combined with the boy’s scream, I was starting to get seriously concerned for my safety. Despite that, she still plastered a smile on her face, her breathing labored.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. You’re Kokonose, right? Dad told me about you. I’m sorry; I think someone’s been messing with my alarm clock...My siblings were pulling a prank on you, but I’ll be sure to yell at them about it later, so...”

Messing with her alarm clock? Her siblings? ...This was making even less sense than before. I had a mountain of questions to ask her, but I figured waiting until we calmed down a little would be advisable. For now, it was best to just leave it to one query. Keeping things in order is paramount at times like these.

I coughed lightly, signaling the upcoming change in subject.

“Um, my name’s Haruka Kokonose. You are...?”

The girl gave me a blank look at first, then flashed me a smile—an

authentic one this time.

“I’m Ayano...Ayano Tateyama.”

LOST DAYS · 3

The upstairs room was warmed by the afternoon sunlight.

Guided into a guest room—the “room you were *supposed* to be shown into,” as Ayano put it—I indulged in some warm tea. The bowl in the middle of the wooden table was lined with a selection of cookies, each one individually wrapped in exquisite fashion.

Anything packaged like that had to be fancy. *Better not wolf 'em down like I do with the full-size bags of chips I sometimes help myself to*—that’s what I told myself, anyway. But *man*, these cookies tasted fabulous. I tried to stop myself, but it was a seemingly insurmountable task.

So I started to talk about anything and everything, trying my hardest to occupy my mouth with something besides food.

“Man, though, what a surprise! I had no idea Mr. Tateyama had four children...So was this ‘Shuuya’ kid the one who locked me in that room earlier?”

“Yeah...,” said Ayano, sitting opposite me. “Pretty much. Oh, I don’t know how to apologize to you...” Then she bowed her head.

Getting locked inside was a shock, to be sure, but I wasn’t hurt or anything, and I couldn’t drum up the will to get all angry about it. I mean, had I been angry about anything in my life so far? I really didn’t think so.

“Ha-ha-ha! Oh, it’s fine, it’s fine. It was kind of like my own personal survival mission, in a way. I’ve never been locked into a room like that before, so it was sort of exciting, even!”

“Uh? Survi...? Ah-ha-ha-ha...!”

And so the conversation awkwardly continued.

It had been about half an hour since my escape from the book room. Ayano had changed from her pajamas to a white dress with a beige cardigan on top. Taking another look at her made me realize that Ayano didn’t resemble Mr. Tateyama very much. From her hair to her dark eyes to her nose, I figured she must’ve taken after her mother’s side of the family.

“I guess I’m the one who has to apologize, though—barging in like this so we can work on our school festival project...”

“Oh, don’t worry about it! Dad almost never has students visit his home like this, so I’m kind of glad to see you. It can be a pretty lively place sometimes, so...”

Ayano paused, staring into space for a moment.

“It can be kind of dangerous, too,” she added, “but...”

I had rarely been a houseguest, but still, I wasn’t expecting *this* kind of warning at our first meeting. Was she talking about more “pranks” from her siblings? Considering my experience in the library, that seemed plausible enough. Judging by how she’d looked when I first saw her, it seemed like they put Ayano through a hell of a lot of grief. *Maybe they’re just in that awkward rebellious stage.* As an only child, I found it kind of fascinating.

“Hey, uh, do you think I could say hello to your siblings? I’m gonna be staying here for a few days, so I might as well introduce myself...”

“Huh?! Uh, introduce yourself?! No! I mean, ummm...”

My request seemed to unnerve Ayano in a rather oddly intense fashion. It was obviously pretty unwelcome. I figured saying hello wouldn’t cause any harm—but maybe there was some other reason why she didn’t want us to meet.

Hmm. It piqued my interest. But this is family stuff I’m trying to meddle in. I can’t stick my nose in too far. Sparking family drama on my first day here would be kind of rude to Mr. Tateyama. Better change the subject.

“Well, if I shouldn’t, then that’s just fine, too! Oh, wait...I almost forgot—I got you a little thank-you present for putting up with me. It’s reaaaaally yummy, too, so you can give it to your siblings if you like!”

I opened up my bag, which I’d placed to the side, and took out a boxed German *Baumkuchen* cake I’d picked up. I bought two, actually, and ate one on the way here. It was exquisite. I was sure Ayano would love it.

“Wha—?! This, this is from a really fancy place, isn’t it? ...Oh, I really couldn’t!”

“No, no, no,” I replied, halfway pushing the cake at her. “I mean, this really doesn’t cover what I owe you for letting me stay over anyway. Go right ahead.”

Ayano apologetically accepted it. Then she exclaimed “Ah!” as if just remembering something. “I know! Not to repay you or anything...but did you have lunch before you came here? I’m about to start making it, but I could whip up something for you, too.”

It was just a little past noon, actually. Ayano’s home cooking...? The concept immediately grabbed my attention. But where I would’ve raised my hand and said “Absolutely!” any other time, I held back for now. The curry I ate during another stop on the way here was still weighing heavily on my stomach. That was only ninety minutes ago, and even I thought it was a little soon to be eating again.

Ayano still needed a reply, though. Resigning myself to my decision, I opened my mouth in order to politely decline.

“...Oh, it’s fine. I actually ate before I came here, so...”

Before I could finish the thought, a loud grumble all but drowned out my voice. It was from my stomach, of course. I tried to laugh it off, saying “Uhhmm...” in an extremely awkward fashion, but it was already too late. Ayano had heard it loud and clear. I could tell because she was staring right at my midsection.

“Um,” she said, “there’s no need to be polite or anything! I don’t eat that much, anyway.”

Ahh...This is so embarrassing. Why did my stomach have to growl right after I’d told her I already ate? Now I probably look like someone who eats and eats but always stays hungry.

And I actually was hungry, a little.

...Okay, actually a lot hungry. Great. Now what? If she’s offering, it’s all right to say yes, isn’t it? No! No, no, no, I can’t. There’s no way I could let myself eat this many times in a...

“Well, I guess I’ll take you up on that after all, then. Hee-hee...”

Just today. I’ll allow it just this one time today.

Going through the afternoon hungry would probably affect my work efficiency or something anyway.

As I gave in to the voices in my head, Ayano, apparently finding all this amusing, snickered a little.

“I’ll try to make a bigger helping for you, okay?”

God, she’s a good person. Especially compared to me. I’m a hopeless case. I lowered my blushing head and just gave an awkward “Thanks” in reply.

“I’ll start cooking now, but before that, let me show you...”

Ayano pointed to a corner of the room. There I found a folding table with a somewhat outdated computer, scanner, and drawing tablet.

“I think that’s everything you need. I’m sorry; Dad set all that up for you, so I don’t really know what’s what. Do you know how to use it?”

As far as I could tell, it was nothing too far beyond my comprehension. I had my phone on me anyway, so I could check online if I ran into any issues.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” I said as I nodded and stood up, cake in hand. “Lemme see what we’ve got here.”

“Okay! I’ll bring your food up once it’s ready.”

Ayano turned to leave the room but stopped, her voice going a tad lower.

“Oh, one more thing. I wanna warn you about my siblings. They, uh... Let’s just say they’ve got a few issues. I don’t think you’ll be able to say hello or talk directly with them.”

The sudden conversational mood shift confused me for a moment.

“Oh? Um, okay. That’s fine by me, but by ‘issues’...Do you mean they’re sick or something?”

I was too far away from her to gauge her expression, but from the tone of her voice, something about this seemed to be making Ayano nervous.

“Well, like, if you run into them in the house somewhere...” Ayano paused, choosing her words carefully. “And if anything kind of weird happens to you, try not to let it bother you too much.”

The roundabout way she put it threw me. What did “kind of weird” mean? And what if it did bother me when...whenever whatever happened?

I wasn't sure what to think about this, but if she was being that evasive about it, it probably wasn't anything I should poke into too much. Probably.

Everybody's got one or two things they don't like talking much about, I guess. Even I do. Better avoid prying about it just to satisfy my curiosity.

"...Uh, sure thing. I'll try not to, so don't worry about me."

This time, I could easily spot the relief on Ayano's face.

"Y-you sure? Well, great...Um, I'm sorry I'm bringing up all this weird stuff out of the blue. I'll deliver your food once it's ready."

With that, she turned back toward me, gave a quick bow, and left the room.

The sounds of her footsteps as she tromped downstairs gradually faded, then disappeared entirely.

"Kind of weird," huh...? Something about the way she'd put that bothered me. No matter what kind of illness they were suffering from, why would it make "weird" things happen to *me*?

Like, what—are they going to vanish or fly around the room or turn into monsters the moment I lay eyes on them...?

"Hah. Yeah right."

I grinned a little at the sheer lunacy of my imagination. Then, realizing I was alone again, I relaxed in my seat and took a deep breath.

I didn't notice it much while we were talking, but being in a room with only one other person always had a tendency to make me nervous.

Actually, how many people my age did I feel totally comfortable chatting with, really? I could only think of one person.

I lay down and stared up at the ceiling. In a moment, I found myself closing my eyes and thinking about that someone.

Her black hair, her anger-laden eyes, her small lips, her almost too-thin body, her kind of short stature, her eternally dissatisfied attitude, her even more eternally foul mouth, her occasional smile...

...*It's strange.* All I had to do was close my eyes, and I could recall all this stuff about her, down to the last detail.

I'm really stupid, aren't I? I didn't need to borrow a photo from Mr. Tateyama at all. Just closing my eyes was enough to show me an image far more vibrant than any picture could provide.

As I thought about this, I was gripped by the insatiable urge to say her name.

...*Nobody's here. If I kept my voice down, I bet it'd be fine.* I took a breath, brought the image back to my mind, and brought the name to my...

Knock, knock, knock.

"Ta—*aaahhhh!* Yes? Yes!! What's up?!"

The unexpected knock on the door twisted me out of my resting state, causing me some back pain as it did. Boy, was *that* a surprise! I was just about to do something really embarrassing. Sitting back up, I nervously prepared for whoever had knocked to enter.

Ayano, maybe? Well, that couldn't be. No way she could cook a meal that fast.

"Pardon me."

But it was Ayano, excusing herself back into the room. She had nothing with her, so lunch appeared to be out of the question for now as she walked up and sat down on the other side of the table. It may've been my imagination, but her face seemed softer than it was when she left.

"Hey. What's up?" I asked. "Something going on?"

Ayano shook her head. "No, nothing too important. I just wanted to talk a little."

"Um...Well, sure, but..."

I wanted to talk about what the holdup was with lunch, but I resisted, not wanting to look too pushy.



“Was there something you needed to discuss, or...?”

“Yeah. Um, not discuss, exactly, but...Well, there’s something I want to ask you point-blank.”

Ayano paused and stared right into my eyes, as if silently warning me that dishonest replies would not be tolerated. I tensed up under her withering gaze, mentally preparing myself to answer whatever request she had. She was interrupting *lunch* for this, after all. What could it be?

My stiff posture made Ayano stare at me again, quizzical. Then she spoke.

“...Um, were you thinking about something dirty just now?”

It felt like a body blow right to my unguarded chest. My heart thudded with dread.

“D-d-dirty? What kinda question is *that*, Ayano?!”

I mean, I...I was thinking about her a little, yes. But nothing dirty! I’m being prosecuted for a crime I didn’t commit!

...In another moment, though, I regained my composure. *Ayano isn’t some kind of magician. It’s not like she can read my mind. “Just now” must have referred to before she knocked on the door. Maybe while we were chatting...?*

“What’re you acting so nervous about...? I’m starting to get suspicious! You were thinking dirty thoughts about me back when we were talking, weren’t you?!”

Ayano’s eyes were glued to mine. So she was talking about our chat. Eesh. And here I was freaking out over the idea of her reading my mind from the first floor. *Well, that’s good, at least...*

Wait! No, it’s not! What’s she mean, was I thinking dirty thoughts? Me? About her?! I had no intention whatsoever of that! The accusation was enough to make me spring into action to defend myself.

“You, you’ve totally got the wrong idea! I mean, Ayano, what’s going on with you?! What did I do to make you even think that for a moment?!”

“It wasn’t anything like that! You men are all just a pack of wolves, aren’t you?!”

What was she *saying*?

Her words were nearly incoherent, but this Ayano was now practically in my face, abruptly taking on a much more angered tone. *Ugh. What’s gotten into her? She seemed so kind and polite up to now. Talk about multiple personality disorder.*

But...like, how should I respond? It’s not like denying it all would make her believe me at this point...*Ah, screw it. Let’s just ask.*

“Umm...So, so what could I do to make you forgive me?”

“What could you do...?”

The question subdued Ayano into silence. She thought for a moment.

“Well, just promise me you won’t look at me and think dirty thoughts again. I’ll forgive you then.”

“Look, really, I didn’t do anything like—”

“Just promise me!!”

Ayano gave the table a whack.

Ahh! Let’s just put it all on the table! I shut my eyes and half shouted:

“Ugghh, all right! I’ll never think dirty thoughts about you again! I promise!”

Oof. What am I even saying now?

“Okay. That’s a promise, all right?”

Ayano beamed at me. After that intimidating outburst, it was a bit hard to take much cheer from her smile. She stood up in triumph. “All right, well, sorry to bother you,” she said, humming to herself as she left the room.

It was the first time in my life, I think, when someone said “Sorry to bother you” and I wanted to reply, “Yeah, I *hope* you are.”

Once the door closed, silence reigned. I was left to myself once again.

What was all that just now? It was such a shock, I just sat there in a daze

for a few moments. Ayano...I'd thought she was this nice, graceful girl. I had no idea there was *that* side to her, too. It definitely hadn't been some kind of joke. Maybe she was dealing with some really terrible stress? She *did* act like her siblings made things kind of rough for her. Maybe that was the cause?

I stared at the wall for a while, pondering her bizarre behavior, when another knock came to the door.

"Hyah...!"

I shot to my feet, surprised once more. Getting scared out of my wits twice in the same day over knocking...*What is even happening to me today? It's Ayano again, isn't it? It's got to be...!*

"Pardon me."

It was Ayano.

She gave me a blank look, noticing how frozen I was, face tightened in anticipation of whatever was coming.

"Um, is something up?"

"No, nothing, really. Ha-ha!"

I tried to force a grin. It didn't work out too well. Which Ayano was I dealing with here? How could she be all smiles around me after what just happened a moment ago?

"No? ...Okay. Um, sorry to make you wait so long for lunch. There wasn't much in the refrigerator, so I ran out to grab a few things..."

Then she lifted up the tray at her feet and effortlessly carried it to the table. The moment she set it down, the smell of something sweet and sour wafted into my nostrils.

"I tried going for a Chinese-style rice bowl, but hopefully it'll suit your palate..."

"Oh, sure thing. It's definitely gonna—I can promise you that!"

My stiffened face loosened, erupting into a full-force grin. No point letting this go cold. I immediately picked up my chopsticks and put my hands together.

"Thanks for making this for—"

...Hang on a second.

The sudden realization made me stop. Ayano peered into my face, a

worried look on her own.

“Is something the matter, Haruka? Were you, um, not a fan of this?”

“Oh, no, no, this is great. I just, uhh...”

I knew exactly what was bothering me. But it wouldn't do me any good to keep mum about it. I decided to ask the question.

“You said you just went out to pick up some ingredients, Ayano?”

“I did, yes,” she replied, the suspicion in her voice telling me she didn't understand the meaning behind the question. Which was her right. But that meant something about the timeline today wasn't matching up with reality. Because if it did, Ayano wouldn't have ever accused me of being some sort of sex-crazed maniac.

Going out to buy food, doing the actual cooking, then running upstairs to yell at me...Doing all that in such a short time couldn't be too easy to pull off.

“...Oh, wait a minute. I actually have the receipt here.”

She pulled it out of a pocket in her cardigan and handed it to me. It listed assorted seafood ingredients, vegetables, and things like ground beef and curry powder that were presumably meant for dinner later. The time printed on it matched up perfectly with the moment Ayano left the room the first time.

My eyes fell back on the table.

This rice bowl...It definitely wasn't some kind of ready-made thing she'd tossed in the microwave. The ingredients were all a bunch of different sizes. It even had some pumpkin. In other words, this was authentic home cooking, and considering all the stuff she put in, it must have taken time to prepare. Perhaps this was a batch she'd whipped up beforehand, but judging by the receipt, I didn't think so. But she really *was* here a moment ago. She really *did* tear me a new one. I didn't hallucinate it.

The more I thought about it, the weirder it seemed.

“Hey, can I ask you one more question, Ayano?”

I could tell I was starting to exasperate my host a little, but she nodded, smile still clear on her face.

“Listen, do you have...like, a twin sister or something?”

I nervously chuckled a bit as I asked it. I knew I was asking a

completely ridiculous question.

Ayano froze up a little, perhaps trying to figure out what it meant. I couldn't blame her. If someone asked *me* out of the blue about a secret twin, I'd do the same thing.

But after a moment, Ayano blurted out "Huh?!" and opened her eyes wide, apparently realizing something important. "D-do you mean someone came in here while I was cooking, maybe? What did she say to you?!"

She brought her head close to mine, pressing me in a different way than she did during her "dirty thoughts" diatribe. This time, she looked more like she was in a panic. I instantly leaned back a little in response, but since she'd asked, I decided to tell her everything.

How she'd gotten the idea into her head that I was leering at her funny. How I'd been forced to promise I would never do it again. And finally, how she'd left the room in a totally serene mood.

I began to feel like I was doing something bad, because her face reddened more and more as I gave her the story. When I finished, she stood up without a word and headed for the door. I assumed she had someone else she wanted to see right then, but I had one more request for her.

"Um, don't get too mad at her, all right?"

"If I can hold it back," she replied softly as she left.

I still couldn't get over how much of a surprise it was.

So the "kind of weird" thing she'd been talking about was a twin sister, huh? Well, that cleared up the confusion, at least. Ayano was a nice girl after all.

...Now, then.

I settled back down in front of my now-cold Chinese rice bowl.

"Here we go!"

Just as I was about to dig in, I heard a scream downstairs. *Guess Ayano couldn't hold it back.*

As I enjoyed the not-too-soft, not-too-hard rice, I wondered why the shout had come from a boy instead of a girl.

LOST DAYS · 4

“Man, am I lucky...”

It was one in the morning. Nearly the entire neighborhood was asleep. The moment I got back from the convenience store, I opened up my plastic bag and grinned from ear to ear. It contained assorted snacks and beverages, as well as two small-ish cups of custard pudding. “Small-ish” makes it sound like this was low-quality stuff, but with convenience-store pudding, small-ish means high quality. Why two, though? Simple: They had a little sweepstakes drawing thing at the counter, and I won a free cup.

I couldn’t believe how lucky I was. I pretty much never win raffles or things like that, but maybe some kind of newfound power was making itself known within my brain. Good job, me.

It really felt great, winning such an awesome prize after doing only about a thousand yen’s worth of shopping. How did convenience stores make any money, doing stuff like this? The thought concerned me a little, but I wasn’t about to give my prize back, so instead I whispered “Thanks” to the clerk out of appreciation.

We had two days left until the school festival, and my little game-dev sleepover was rapidly coming to a head. In fact, since I was just about done with the coloring work for Bear-Rilla and the rest of my zoo, all I had left to do was draw up a few more backgrounds. The “climax” part mainly involved Mr. Tateyama, who had been pulling all-nighters the whole time. Listening to the late-night moaning from his computer desk always made me feel at fault, somehow, but I couldn’t really help him with his programming work.

So instead, I’ve been our official food-and-drink supplier for the past few days. It also gave me a chance to procure dinner for myself, so it was a win-win for everybody. Is that how you use that term? I dunno. I guess it doesn’t matter.

I didn't want to just sit there idly, though. Mr. Tateyama asked me for coffee, and he was about to get it. I took off my shoes and headed down the hall. It wasn't that far to the stairway, so I didn't bother turning on a light, keeping my hand against the wall as I proceeded.

The rest of the family had to be sleeping by this time. I didn't want to wake them up, so I tried my hardest not to make a sound. Slowly, carefully, I crept along, and as I did I passed by the door with the KID'S ROOM plate. For a moment, the events of my first day here flashed across my mind—getting locked in the book room, being accused of possessing a filthy mind. That was four days ago already. Time flies.

Funnily enough, that whole time, I never ran into any of Ayano's siblings again. I spent most of my time cooped up in my room, but it seemed odd that we never saw a hint of one another, even though we were in the same house. They had to be going to school over these four days, and I'm pretty sure we would have been sharing a bathroom...

I climbed the stairs slowly, taking care not to make any creaking sounds, as my mind dwelled on these mystery siblings.

Ayano told me not to worry about them on the first day, and so I didn't. I made a point not to bring them up whenever I talked to her. But, to be honest, my curiosity was starting to consume me. What could they have been thinking, pulling all those pranks on me the first day? And why was Ayano so adamant about not letting me so much as see them?

“Huh?”

Once I reached the upstairs hallway, my plan was to head right for my teacher's room. Instead, I stopped at the top of the stairs. The door to the room I was sleeping in was half-open, and for some reason, light was leaking out. Had I forgotten to turn out the lights when I left? No, I definitely remembered doing that. *So what's up, then...?*

...*Hmm?*

What's that? It was hard to make out from the glare, but it looked like

something was slithering around under the door...

Whoa. Is whatever that is coming this way?

Wait! Wh-what the...?! Huh? Huh?!

“Agh...!!”

The tiny shadow that jumped out the doorway zoomed toward me at blazing speed, then bit my right foot. The sudden pain made me want to shout out loud, but I managed to hold it back.

What the hell?! What just bit me?!

I crouched down, trying my best to shoo the dark menace away, but as I did, the door burst open the rest of the way.

The light pouring out now fully illuminated the doorway. Inside, I spotted the silhouette of a boy.

“H-Hanao! No!”

The boy who came out the door looked pretty disoriented, but his aim was true as he swooped down and picked up the blob in the darkness. Now that it was exposed to the light, I could see what the shadow was. Ahead of the pain, ahead of the boy, I addressed it first.

“A, a hamster...?”

The boy holding Hanao the hamster crouched down so we were at the same level, and looked at me concerned.

“Um, are you all right?! I’m—I’m really, really sorry about this...!”

He looked about one or two years younger than me. His stark black hair had a couple of hairpins in the front. He was dressed for the outdoors, with a white shirt and cargo pants, but the boy’s obvious timidity indicated he wasn’t exactly the rugged mountain type. He was frantically bowing at me in apology, so I sat on the floor and tried to assuage him.

“It...it’s fine! Just calm down! I don’t think it broke the skin, so it’s all good! Okay?”

I checked to be sure, but I wasn’t hurt at all. It must’ve gone easy on me. The boy looked at least a little relieved to hear this.

“Are...are you sure?”

It *did* still hurt a little, but considering how teary-eyed the boy was, I

decided not to dwell on it. “Yep, no problem,” I said, smiling in as friendly and engaging a manner as I could. “So are you Ayano’s brother?”

The boy looked a little scared by the question, but still nodded broadly.

“Y-yes, I am, but...are you gonna report this to her?”

The moment he asked the question, he began shaking.

Report? It wasn’t like we were at boot camp. But judging by his act, I probably wouldn’t want to be around Ayano when she was mad. She *did* make her brother scream on my first day here, after all. I’d...better keep that in mind.

“No, of course not! Um, I just wanted to say hello, since I haven’t seen you before...” I extended a friendly hand to him. “My name is Haruka Kokonose. What’s yours?”

The boy shifted his hamster to one hand in order to shake mine.

“Um, it’s Kousuke. Hi.”

That name raised a flag in my memory. Ayano mentioned a “Shuuya” on my first day here, I was pretty sure. One of them had to be older than the other. Was it Kousuke, or Shuuya? I started to get curious.

Kousuke stood back up and started bowing again. “Um, I’m gonna go downstairs. Again, I’m really sorry about scaring you this late.” Going to bed, maybe? It was pretty late. I wanted to talk to him a little more...but he was probably tired. Maybe next time.

“Sure. Good...”

...Or maybe he wasn’t? You never knew. An odd sense of anticipation made me stop midsentence. Did I really need to occupy his time like this? *Ooh, but I should really ask now that I have the chance. Ooh, but it’s not nice for me to pry into family matters, either.*

Still, a little chat wouldn’t hurt anyone, right?

“K-Kousuke?”

“...Yes?”

Kousuke gave me a puzzled look. I picked up the convenience-store bag at my side and took an item out of it.

“You a fan of custard pudding?”



“I...I don’t think I’ve ever eaten something so good before! I usually just eat the ones that come in three-packs, so...!”

Kousuke, seated across the desk from me, appeared to be in a state of pure bliss. *Not so fast, Kousuke. Those three-packs shouldn’t be ignored, either. There’s a sort of universal appeal to them. You’ll come around to that someday.* As I mentally intoned these words of enlightenment to myself, I brought another spoonful of custard to my lips. *Yum.*

Mr. Tateyama looked pretty shocked when I brought him his coffee, Kousuke following right behind. The way he put it, the three children Ayano played big sister to were all super-shy around strangers, almost never getting friendly with people they didn’t know. Being told that seemed to embarrass Kousuke a little, but now I understood why I practically never saw them.

“That little guy really likes you, though, huh?”

Hanao the hamster was resting quietly on Kousuke’s shoulder. He seemed totally serene, no longer a threat to my feet.

“Hee-hee! Yeah, we’re really good friends,” said Kousuke, giving Hanao a few pets across his back. He stretched himself out appreciatively in response.

“So you’re here to work on your festival presentation, Kokonose? I think Ayano said it was the day after tomorrow.”

“Uh-huh. It’s the big yearly school festival. You could visit it too if you like, Kousuke. There’s a ton of food stalls and stuff, and it’s like a really big party every year.”

Kousuke dolefully shook his head at the invite. “Thanks...but I better not. I can’t deal with lots of people in one place. There’s some stuff I have to do on that day, too.”

The thought seemed to actively depress Kousuke. Mr. Tateyama *did* just talk about how shy they were, didn’t he? Probably should’ve been a bit more thoughtful there. I opened my mouth to try to gloss over the topic, but Kousuke beat me to it.

“Oh, but Ayano and...and the other two said they’d visit.”

“Oh, really? All of them?!”

That was a bit of a surprise. Actually, more than a bit. A lot. I was all but convinced they hated me by then. But they were really coming over? Wow! The thought instantly excited me.

“Well, that’s really great!” I smiled at him. “Makes me even more excited about doing this right, you know?”

Kousuke returned the smile. “Yeah. I’ll be rooting for you, too. Really, if I didn’t have that stuff to do, I would’ve tried to go for a little while.”

“Oh, yeah, you mentioned that. What kind of stuff, though? Something difficult?”

“Kind of,” Kousuke said. “I’m going on an interview for a part-time paperboy job. There’s this place that’ll hire kids my age, and I’ve just *got* to get it.”

I see. Sounded convincing enough, for a moment. But Kousuke couldn’t have been more than thirteen or fourteen. It wasn’t an age most people recommended kids start working. Why was he going through the effort? I found the question difficult to ask, but Kousuke, picking up on my feelings, continued.

“I feel like I really have to change. Mom’s dead, and everyone else is working so hard...I can’t act like this total coward for the rest of my life.”

Then he fell silent, noticing my reaction to this.

...So, um, wait a minute. What did Kousuke just say?

“Mom’s dead.” ...Meaning, Mr. Tateyama’s wife? That was crazy. My teacher never mentioned a word of that to us. And ever since I joined this school—forever, really, as long as I’d known him—I’d never seen him demonstrate even a twinge of sadness. Even as we entered the second semester, he was the same as always.

“...She passed away? Mr. Tateyama’s wife?”

Kousuke looked startled at the question.



“Dad never told you?”

I nodded silently. Kousuke sighed, as if he saw this coming well in advance.

“Yeah, I guess he doesn’t like people seeing him act all sad and stuff... He never even cried about it in front of us. I’m sure he just didn’t want you guys to worry about him, Kokonose.”

Was that all there was to it? Was he smiling and laughing every day simply as some kind of bluff? Was he actually crying where nobody could see him?

An image of my smiling teacher burst into my mind. The thought depressed me.

“...I guess we’re putting our teacher through a lot, aren’t we?”

Kousuke shook his head.

“Nah, I don’t think so. Dad talks about you a lot, Kokonose. He said you were his ‘pride and joy’ and stuff.”

Hearing that just about made me want to cry, but I held back on that for Kousuke’s sake.

“Well...Wow. Geez. It’d be nice if he told me sometime.”

“He was pretty drunk at the time,” Kousuke added with a chuckle.

Drunk, huh? I didn’t have much trouble picturing *that* scene.

Then Kousuke clapped his hands in realization. “Oh! Right. Boy, Dad was really going at it that evening. He kept getting drunker and drunker, and he told Ayano, like, ‘I’ll bring him over sometime so you can be his girlfriend’ and stuff. Even though Dad said he’d die if she ever ran off with someone.”

Kousuke smiled at the memory, but it was a major shock to me. The events of day one at the Tateyama house flashed back into my memory again.

“Ha-ha-ha! That’s, uh...pretty nuts, yeah. Heh...”

“Yeah, isn’t it? And everyone else took him seriously, too, like, ‘We’ll protect you from that guy, Ayano!’ and...um, Kokonose?”

Ouch. Kousuke wasn’t in the room at that time, I suppose, but that mission to “protect” Ayano from me...I think they actually carried it out. In

a really physical form, too. *Well, rest assured, Shuuya and whoever else it was. I'm never going to think improper thoughts about Ayano again. Probably.*

Unable to withstand the awkwardness, I decided to steer our little custard conference toward its end.

"W-well, Kousuke, it's getting pretty late. How about we grab some sleep?"

"Huh? Oh, you're right. It's two already. Sorry if I kept you up."

He picked up his pudding container and stood. Hanao flexibly adjusted himself to this sudden movement, remaining firmly on his shoulder. Huh. They really *were* good friends.

I stood up to see him out. "Oh, you're fine," he said.

"No worries," I replied as I sidled up behind him and walked him to the door. "Good luck at the job interview."

Kousuke forced a smile. "Good luck at the...", he responded.

...There should have been a few more words after that, but before he could say them, Kousuke brought a hand to his forehead and looked down, averting his eyes. I supported his back.

"I-I'm okay," Kousuke said. "I just get a little dizzy sometimes." But he practically looked like he was having heart palpitations. Not okay at all.

"Are you sure? Did you need some medicine, or...?"

"I'll be back to normal in a second. I'm fine..."

His face was clearly starting to lose color as his head drooped. He seemed to be trembling a bit as well. It was clearly abnormal, but Kousuke acted oddly used to it, so I said nothing and just kept patting his back instead.

A few moments later, the episode was over. Kousuke stood back up and removed his hand from his forehead. The expression behind his hand seemed a little sadder than before.

"I-I'm sorry to make you worry."

"No, it's fine. But are you sure you're—"

"I-I'm fine!" Kousuke said before I could finish. I let it go, figuring it wasn't worth making him stress further. He made his way to the stairs as I watched from the doorway. The final look he gave me still seemed a bit

melancholy. I never did figure out what was going through his head that night.

I hit the sack earlier than usual after wrapping up a bit more work, but the thought of Mr. Tateyama's wife made it hard to fall asleep. That book room must have belonged to her after all. I wondered what kind of a woman she'd been. A kind one, I assumed; one who cared for her children. Perhaps it was Ayano who stepped up to take care of them in her absence.

And look at Kousuke. He was trying his hardest to "change," too, as he'd put it. It was pretty impressive, a boy that age thinking about life like that. And it was impressive how someone could instill people with so much will and perseverance, even when they're no longer there.

Look at me, meanwhile. Am I helping anyone persevere in life? I dunno. It sounds tough.

I tried thinking about it for a bit, but my head didn't offer me much of anything useful. The threads of thought untied themselves, my sense of self loosening and relaxing. Before I knew it, I was in a multicolored darkness. Nothing to fear, and nothing to feel.

This must be what dying is like, I thought to myself, just as the last of my consciousness faded into the bottomless world of sleep.

LOST DAYS · 5

The setting sun cast a dazzling array of colors into the silent ghost town.

The neglected place was devoid of the human beings who once ruled over it. All that remained were the hideous and terrifying “monsters,” evolving into all-powerful beasts that were now the supreme rulers of the earth. It took merely a month for these monsters to wreak havoc upon all the creatures of the world, their musclebound, ferocious forms offering no mercy as they laid waste to the land...or so they thought.

But a single girl survived the carnage.

A gunshot thudded through the air in a flash of orange that matched the early evening sky. The “Bear-Rilla” monster that almost made it to the muzzle of her gun exploded, blood and flesh falling like confetti onto the pavement.

A single overgrown talon tore through the torrent of gore, aimed straight for the girl’s head. She dodged it just in time, calmly adjusting the grip on her gun.

The Meowtarus lunging at the girl lost its balance in the aftermath of the strike, exposing its unprotected chest. She responded immediately without mercy, pointing her weapon at the monster’s stomach and pulling the trigger. Lead plowed its way into its gut, and with a scream, the Meowtarus blew apart.

The girl, spattered in blood, shot a glance toward the old shopping district. A horde of marauding monsters advanced upon her, slaving and screaming as they did. Taking a moment to catch her breath, the girl swung her gun around. The empty magazine flew out of the grip, clinking against the pavement. The moment the new one was loaded, she pointed her gun back toward the monsters and spoke.

“How ’bout I blow all of you into tiny pieces, huh...?”

With a loud bang, her gun began to spit fire. Her shots, coming in bursts of one or two, tore through the horde like a computer-guided laser, turning them all into chunks of red meat.

The girl grinned evilly. Despite being hopelessly outnumbered, she was the perfect picture of serenity. And just as the seemingly infinite monster army started to bore her, the girl's final shot brought the war's end into full bloom across the blood-soaked street...

I sighed at the seemingly perfect feat of gameplay taking place before me as the monologue continued in my mind.

"Dancing Flash Ene."

... I saw there another side of Takane I'd had no idea about.

*

The day of the festival was here.

Thanks chiefly to Mr. Tateyama's superhuman efforts, *Headphone Actor* was now complete. In fact, it was astonishingly well put together. I doubted anyone would ever guess it was built in only a week.

But even more than the quality of the game itself, Takane's skills were like nothing in this world. It was pinpoint accurate, like she was a robot programmed to destroy this game, and everyone who saw her play was struck with awe.

Today, for the first time, I realized how *cool* someone playing a video game could really be.

We were expecting dozens of matches to take place today, but as the day unfolded, things just grew more and more one-sided.

I didn't even need to check the results screen. Takane dominated.

She's incredible! This is so cool, Takane!

I looked on in respectful admiration as she wrapped up another match. The dimness of the room made it hard to gauge her expression, but after pulling off such a flawless, magnificent victory, I'm sure she must have been satisfied with herself. She had to be. The thought made Takane seem like a real soldier in my eyes, battle-hardened and ready for action.

The adulation poured out of my mouth. "Great work, Takane! You won again! Man, that was just..."

Takane was right next to me, but in a way, she wasn't. *I need to call her the name everyone else uses to sing her praises...!*

"...Maybe I should call you Ene, though, huh?"

Takane, basking in the light of the monitor, casually opened her mouth.

"Shut up, you dumbass..."

The words, backed by the pounding music from the game, moved me. I felt a shiver rush across my body.

Another thing I had just learned today was that Takane had apparently taken second place at the nationwide championship for some online game or other. It made her, like, *super* Internet famous. She had real fans and everything. I just thought she was this typical girl, and now I couldn't believe she had *this* aspect, too.

But...man. That serenity, that presence of mind...in every way, she lived up to the Dancing Flash name. *Yes! Yes, I know I'm a dumbass! Dang, this is cool!*

I was in no position to sit back and admire her, though. I stood up and smiled at the challenger.

"All right, thanks for playing! I'm afraid you can't take the challenge twice in a row. Thanks very much for that incredible battle!"

The moment I finished speaking, applause thundered across the dimly lit science storage room. Every bit of floor space was occupied by onlookers. No doubt about it—we were attracting a pretty huge audience.

The challenger, dressed in military gear, stood right up and saluted at Takane. "Thank you!" he shouted. "I never would've thought I'd get to play against Dancing Flash Ene in a place like this...It's such an honor!"

Yeah. I agree. That was a good match, too. Just watching from the side gave me goose bumps.

Soon, the audience began whispering to itself. "I'm next!" "No, let me take her on next...!" It was an impressive sight. Takane's entire fan base

must have been in this room.

Apparently this all got started because our first guest knew about Takane and told all his friends on the Net about this school festival.

Once they got word about the event, Takane's fans stormed our school from across the country for a chance to compete against her. That's how all this happened. Well, maybe not "across the country," but it kind of felt that way.

Amid the chatter, I gave the signal to the next person up and guided him to the challenger's seat. After a quick rundown of the rules from Takane, the game began and the audience instantly fell silent.

This tension...it's like watching a real sporting event.

I didn't know this since I had never really watched someone play before, but I had no idea competitive video games could get so exciting. Did they have a lot of championships like this? I'd love to see one sometime.

"...Whoa, crap! The time!"

Oops. I was so lost in the heat of the moment that I forgot my own job. I reluctantly took my eyes off the game screen and checked the clock and the number of people in the audience.

Just as I feared, we had under fifteen minutes before the end of the festival. There was no way everyone in the room would be allowed a match with Takane, currently soaking up the applause once more after another blowout. This constant warfare must have been tiring her out by now. I stepped up to give her a bit more inter-match breathing room, using my new name for her in this realm.

"You still doing okay, Ene?! We're closing up in ten minutes, so hang in there!"

Takane muttered something or other in response, but I couldn't make it out between the game's music and the clamor of the audience surrounding us.

In terms of remaining time, we had room for two, maybe three more players. If we were proceeding along with our plan, Takane would need to produce a "winner" for us pretty shortly. The purpose of this wasn't to

establish the legend of Takane as this unbeatable monolith. Somebody needed to come home today with that fish specimen in their hands.

Takane said that losing sometime during the second half of the day would help keep things exciting. Did she still remember that, though? I wasn't so sure any longer. She was in full Dancing Flash mode right now, so much so that it'd make you cry. Perhaps all she was thinking about was how she'd hunt down her next opponent and wring every ounce of life out of him.

That would be seriously bad news. But I didn't want to wreck her concentration by bothering her too many times, either...I was starting to fidget a little, unsure which tack to take, when someone slapped a hand on my shoulder and a whispering voice found my ear.

“...Pardon me, Haruka!”

I turned around to find Ayano standing there. Kousuke mentioned she would be coming, but finally seeing her in person filled me with happiness. Come to think of it, he mentioned that his other siblings would visit, too, didn't he? Did they ever show up?

“Oh, Ayano! Sorry, I'm being pulled in a million directions right now...”

“No, no, sorry to show up when you're so busy,” she replied, scoping out her surroundings. “Running a pretty successful scene, huh? This is quite a surprise!”

“Boy, you said it. I'm pretty shocked, too. We got a lot more visitors than we were expecting. I'm sorry, Ayano, I'm not sure that I can fit you in...”

We had just a little time left and far too many competitors waiting. Ayano's chances of getting a match in were slim. I bowed my head to her in regret, but she just smiled, presumably expecting to be disappointed.

“Oh, I'll be fine. The guy I came here with is in line to play, so she can just play with him instead...”

She took her eyes away from me and turned toward someone off to Takane's side. There I spotted a boy in a red hoodie staring blankly at the display. Unlike most of our current challengers, he didn't seem to have any

passion at all for video games, but given his position in line, he was likely up next to take on Takane.

“That guy’s in my class at school,” Ayano explained, apparently fidgeting over something. “I didn’t want to go to the festival by myself, so I invited him, and he...well, said yes, I guess. And when I say I ‘invited’ him, it’s really just that, okay? Nothing weird or anything.”

...Um, yeah. Sure. I can read you like a book, Ayano. I was about to sneer at her and say “Ha-haaa!” but stopped myself just in time, not wanting to come off like a creep.

As we chatted, the boy in the red hoodie sat down on the challenger’s seat. He was our first younger contestant in quite a while. Even Takane looked a little amazed.

Hang on. This might actually work out pretty well, timing-wise. If Takane played like she always did, she was almost certainly going to kick the snot out of this guy. That’d probably make him look pretty uncool in front of Ayano, and...um, that probably wouldn’t be good for him, I figured.

So let’s convince Takane to throw the game on purpose instead. It’s about time for us to do that anyway, so...yeah. Sounds like a plan to me. No time like the present, either. I quickly tapped Takane on the shoulder, once again calling her the only name appropriate for her now.

“Ene...I’m sorry to interrupt you while you’re in the groove, but we better give out our prize before we have to close. Would you mind much if you let this kid beat you...?”

Takane fixed her gaze on the boy in the hoodie. After all the hard work she put in today, having to tell her this at the very end honestly didn’t make me feel too good. But our aim today was to make the best “shooting gallery” we possibly could, and that meant keeping our customers happy, too.

She gave me an affirmative nod and began to explain the game to the boy without complaint. I took a few steps back to gain a better vantage point, hoping to take in every moment of this final battle.

...They seemed to take an oddly long time to get started.

Taking a closer look, Takane and the guy in the hoodie seemed to be

talking to each other. What about, though? It didn't look like a friendly chat, whatever it was. I was a little concerned, but from my position, the game music drowned out their whole conversation.

Since I couldn't do much where I was, I looked to the side, only to find Ayano staring at them with a dour expression. Kind of like a mom during parent-visitation day at school. I figured I'd speak up about it.

"What's up, Ayano? Are you worried about something?"

Ayano's shoulders twitched a bit in surprise. "Kind of, I suppose," she reluctantly said. "He...He can be kind of rude sometimes. He doesn't like to mince words with people. I hope he's not being mean to her or anything..."

She really *was* acting like a worried mother.

When it came to being rude, Takane was no slouch herself. That was one of her main personality traits. It made me wonder if this boy was the same way.

...Ooh, if he is, that could be rough news. It'd pretty much immediately get Takane's goat, for one. I had a bad feeling about it all, but there was no point needlessly worrying Ayano if I didn't have to, so I tried to keep the conversation innocuous.

"Well, I think it'll be fine. Takane can be pretty patient with people, too, so—"

The moment I said it, Takane spoke:

"...I am *not!!*...going to lose."

...Well, *that's strange*. She was doing the exact opposite of what we were planning.

In a hurry, I shoved my way to Takane's side. *She's gonna beat him?! This isn't good!*

"Wait a sec, Takane...You have to lose this, remember?"

But I didn't even need to look at her face to know she was riled up. I don't think any of my words even registered in her mind.

"...I'll become your servant and call you 'master' and everything! But I'm *not* gonna lose!"

Another victory guarantee. We had to lose right now, but Takane was more excited for this match than any of the dozens she fought before.

Did anyone else in the audience hear her shouting? Ooh, I guess Ayano did. Her face was red from ear to ear. Great.

Well, nothing I could do now. Giving up on the effort, I stood and returned to Ayano's side. My "sorry" and her "I apologize" came out almost simultaneously.

A sound effect indicated that the final match of the day was underway.

...Right from the start, I noticed something.

There was an insane number of monsters popping up on-screen. She must have turned the difficulty level up to maximum. If she was thinking about losing, she never would've done that. Even if she was just trying to entertain the audience, she still wouldn't do that. It wasn't hard to guess what was going through Takane's mind at that very moment.

"Damn, she's pissed..."

I cradled my head with a hand. "Is she?!" Ayano exclaimed, the blood draining from her face. But no matter what we had to say about it, this battle couldn't be stopped. That much I could tell with one look at the scene before me.

The two skilled competitors' button-mashing at their respective controllers resulted in an ocean of on-screen blood spurts.



The gunshots, the death screams, the noises of flesh ripping apart...They poured out from the speakers, creating a cacophony that filled the room. It sounded like nothing a shooting game should ever generate, and it awed me. The audience, silent up to now, was starting to erupt into cheers and gasps.

It was mastery in motion, unfolding before us second after exhilarating second.

The monsters, appearing on-screen before instantly being blown away, were difficult to even tell apart with the naked eye by now. Spotting them, aiming, firing—both of them repeated this process over and over again with startling speed and accuracy. It was impossible to put into words, but if I had to, I could only call it “intense.”

This battle was undoubtedly going to be one for the history books. That boy in the hoodie was easily an even match for Takane...Maybe even better than her, in fact. And Takane, on her side, was taking no prisoners. I no longer had any idea who was going to win.

The monsters must’ve appreciated having these two masters of their craft take them on. *Great work today, guys. It was a tough role to fulfill, but you’ve made this fun for a whole lot of people. I’m definitely gonna be making pins out of all of you later.*

The two minutes seemed to drag on forever. Now, though, we were at the final ten seconds. Neither side budged from their pursuit of perfection, and the dead heat was continuing on to the very end. Only one of them could win.

Which is it? Who’s it going to be? As we all watched with bated breath, I found an emotion I wasn’t expecting starting to make itself known in my heart.

...I’m so jealous.

Both of them are so cool. I’m incredibly jealous of them. Why am I

standing here, letting this amaze me like an idiot?

Look at Takane, lost in battle, body twitching this way and that as she plays...What could she be feeling right now? It's got to be just too much fun for her.

...I can't stand it. This is so frustrating. I want to sit next to Takane and play a game with her, too. I want to become good enough to get Takane impassioned like this.

Ah, how awesome would that be, if I managed to do that? If I had that kind of future in store...

The two of them, silhouetted by the light from the displays, seemed like faraway presences. All I could do was stand behind them, staring at them with envious eyes.

*

The game-over buzzer rang out, and the "results" screen popped up.

I crouched next to Takane again. I wanted to say something to her.

I wanted it to be something like "That was great!" or "I was so amazed!"...but I couldn't utter a word.

The "results" screen was pretty simple. All it told you was whether you won or lost. That's it. The score on Takane's was her highest of the day, but the word WIN wasn't underneath it.

Takane lost.

"Takane..."

While I fumbled around for words, the kid in the red hoodie quietly stood up and headed for the exit.

Oh no. I need to give him our prize. After such a passionate duel, I could never let him go home empty-handed.

I thought for a moment before figuring out what I'd say to Takane. I chose to just go with what I was feeling.

“...Ene, that was *awesome*, right up to the end! Great work today!”

*

“Hey! W-wait a sec...!”

I chased after the boy, running short on breath.

The specimen I had in hand was pretty heavy. It wasn't exactly attractive-looking, either. As a prize, it presented some issues. Why didn't I notice that before? He might think I was just screwing with him or something. But given that we advertised a “wonderful prize,” I had to give him *something*. If I didn't, and Takane was branded a liar, that'd be just awful. *Even if he says he doesn't need it, I've got to get him to take it...!*

“Stop, please...!”

I called to the kid multiple times, but he never paid me any attention as he quickly headed toward the front door.

Wasn't he supposed to be going out with Ayano? 'Cause he pretty much left her in the dust. Was *that* okay?! I recalled Ayano gingerly introducing the kid earlier. She must've been looking forward to this day a lot. Getting stood up like that made me pity her a little.

As if my feelings telepathically came across to him, the hoodie kid suddenly turned around. Our eyes met. It was now or never. I tried to sound as authoritative as possible:

“Um, this is your prize! Please take it!!”

The kid looked dubiously at me. He must have remembered me from the room, though, because he didn't play dumb. I managed to catch up to him just as he removed his earbuds and put them in his pocket. Oh. Well, no wonder he wasn't listening to me.

“Uh, what's *that*...?”

The question could only be described as scornful. I had to agree with him. *What is this thing I'm lugging around?*

...Wait. No. I need to answer him.

“This is your prize for winning in that shooting gallery...I came here to present it to you.”

“Huh?!”

“It's your prize. You earned it. It, um, it's all yours.”

Ugh. I feel like I'm trying to sell it to him. But I had to stay strong. Otherwise, I wasn't sure he was going to accept it at all. Oof, look at him, he looks like he's hating every moment of this.

"Umm...I don't need it."

I knew it.

"Well, could you just take it, maybe? It'd be like taking home a memory of today. What do you think?"

Yes, I know. I'm asking a hell of a lot from you. The only thing this would be a memory of is a deep-sea expedition. Ugh, what am I going to dooooo...? He's never going to take it now. Like, why would anyone even want something like...

...Ah.

"...Hey, you were going out with Ayano today, right?"

"Yeah, so what?"

The boy now looked even more suspicious of me. Maybe I was too sudden with it. But I couldn't turn back now. *Just push a little harder...*

"Well, maybe you don't need this, but I think Ayano would really appreciate it if you gave it to her. I'm, like, totally sure of that."

I honestly felt this was my most brilliant idea of the day. Who purchased this in the first place, after all? It was Ayano's father, Mr. Tateyama. If Ayano took it, at least it'd be useful for something. In fact, she'd probably love it if it was a present from this guy. I was pretty sure she liked this guy a lot.

Yep. I am so smart sometimes. Not only was I doing my job here; I was also potentially playing Cupid for these two lovebirds. Ah, what can I say? Heh-heh-heh...

"Oh, okay. Could you give that to Ayano directly for me? See you."

The boy turned and started walking again, thinking nothing more of it. I chased him down in a panic.

"Whaaa—?! No, wait a second! It doesn't mean anything unless you're the one giving it to her...Like, if you're the one she's accepting it from...!"

"Uh, you're really not making any sense. Stop following me, all right?"

The kid refused to slow down as he spat the words at me, weaving his

way through the festival crowd. With the baggage I was carrying, I had trouble keeping up.

Finally, we reached the school's front door. The boy removed his guest slippers and was just about done putting on his own shoes when I reached him.

"Ahh, wait a minute! I'll think of something, so...um...!"

Crap. If he leaves the school grounds, I won't be able to chase him around forever. What do I do now...?!

Then, at that moment, someone bumped into my shoulder. "Sorry!" she said. I turned around to find a female student selling drinks and looking at me with sorrowful eyes. The cooler slung from her shoulder had SODA 100 YEN written on it.

"Well, I'm outta here. Please don't follow—"

"Do...do you want a soda?!"

The boy stared slack-jawed at me.

"Uh, I don't really like sugary drinks like that, so..."

"Please! Just one can! You gotta be thirsty, right?! That was such a killer match, I bet some soda would taste great right now! C'mon. let's have a drink! C'mon!"

The boy responded with what almost seemed like fear at my fervent request. Other people nearby us stopped, wondering what my deal was.

The drink seller took a look at us. "Um, would you like two, then?" she asked optimistically.

"Yes, two, please!" I immediately replied. "Okay?!"

The boy opened his mouth a couple times, attempting to say something, but then sighed heavily, giving up all hope.

"...All *riiiight*. If you want me to drink it, I'll drink it."

The response made me want to wave my fist in the air. *Yes! I did it! I did it, Takane! I stopped him! Now our booth is a total success!*

"Thank you very much!" the girl said, smiling. A few people around us began to clap. "I don't know what's going on," one of them said, "but hey, good job."

It was a good job. Seriously...

...Why was I going through all this again?

*

There were communal spaces dotted around the school for festival purposes. We chose a simple bench on the north side of the first floor, not far from the front entrance, to sit down and take a load off.

“...Ooh, this is good.”

The hoodie kid, who introduced himself as Shintaro Kisaragi, looked lovingly at his can. It was like he had never tried soda before. I gave him a questioning look.

“There’s nothing that rare about it, is there?”

There wasn’t. In fact, he was drinking the most well-known soda brand in the world. How the heck did he not know about it?

“Well, I know about it and all,” Shintaro replied, sounding a little hurt. “I just never picked it out for myself because I don’t like that sugary stuff too much.”

“Oh, I see!” I smiled. “Guess you just made a new discovery.”

“Guess so,” Shintaro said, already uninterested in the topic.

“...So you want me to give this to Ayano?”

Shintaro looked down at the fish specimen by our feet.

I did finally manage to have him accept it, although I was honestly starting to regret bringing up Ayano’s name.

“I think she’d be happy to have it, but...I’m sorry. If she says she doesn’t want it, we can take it back.”

“Ahhh, it’s fine. Even if she doesn’t, I got a sister who likes weird stuff like this, so I’ll give it to her instead.”

Shintaro stood up and tossed his empty can into a garbage bin next to the bench. *Hmm. He’s a pretty nice kid after all, isn’t he? I don’t know what he did to set off Takane so bad. He’s a pretty damn good gamer, too. Where’d he come from, anyway?* I decided to send out a couple of feelers.

“Y’know, though, you were really good at that game. Do you play in any competitions or anything?”

“Huh? Oh, that was just messing around. All you had to do was shoot the enemies when they came up on-screen. It’s pretty easy.”

Wow. Yeah, he and Takane were never gonna be too compatible. Kind of like oil and water, in fact.

“Y-yeah...? Well, it was still really impressive. I mean, pulling off what you did...I’m really kind of jealous. I sure can’t do anything like that...”

...Oops. Now what? I was starting to get frustrated with myself again. *Damn, I’m an idiot. Why am I being jealous? I could never play like them.*

But...oooh, that was so cool. If I could play like Shintaro can, then maybe Takane and I could—

“Uh?” Shintaro looked perplexed. “Well, if you wanna do that, why don’t you?”

“...Huh?”

“I’m just saying, if you want to play games online or whatever, just do whatever you want. It’s not like anyone’s stopping you, are they?”

“Well, no, but...”

Shintaro sighed and scratched his head. “So just do it,” he repeated. “Do what you like. If you want, I could introduce you to some pretty good... games...”

The feelings running through my mind were probably written all over my face. Shintaro’s “Uh-oh, what have I done now” look of shock made that obvious enough.

It was four in the afternoon. Just as someone over the PA system announced that the festival was over, I stood up and spoke as clearly as I could.

“Yes! Please! I’d love that!”

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“Huh. So that’s how you got friendly with each other? A classroom, late at night...That’s pretty romantic.”

“You don’t have to make it sound all gross like that! It’s not like anything happened.”

“Aw, what’s the big deal?”

Not spending any of the money I was gifted for the past several New Year’s Days resulted in a pretty decent amount of savings. It let me buy a much better PC than I was expecting.

Having a computer made me realize all over again how useful the Internet was. You could play games while using voice chat to talk to people without a phone, and it was all free, too. Amazing.

I was using the software Shintaro had told me to download to talk to him right now. But was this really a good thing? We weren’t going to put the phone company out of business, were we? I was a little worried about that.

Several months had passed since the school festival.

Ever since that day, it had become a nightly ritual for me and Shintaro to play online games together. It was the first time I’d done anything like that, but I found them both incredibly deep and astoundingly fun the more I got into them.

I always pictured video games as these things you played by yourself, but online games were kind of like virtual worlds, places where you could interact with people and compete with them in real time from anywhere in the world. Some of them were newbies like me, and some were virtual mountain hermits who spent years honing their craft. Working on my own skills and taking on these faceless opponents felt less like a game and more like interacting with a different culture. I quickly found it incredibly addictive.

These days, I was spending nearly every evening online, playing *Dead Bullet -1989-* (Takane's home turf) and a variety of others. I mixed up my choices because Shintaro told me to. "You'll be less one-dimensional that way," he said. "It'll make you a better player."

Perhaps because of that, I was building a pretty decent record for myself in *Dead Bullet*. My handle, "Konoha," was starting to get a little name recognition whenever I showed up in the lobby. Shintaro, on the other hand, never played it. The game helped me overcome my fear of zombies for good, but apparently his case of undead-phobia was a lot more serious than mine.

"You've gotten really good, though, haven't you? At this point, I bet you'd get up there in the rankings for pretty much any game you tried."

"Huh? Y-you think so? Well, that's just because you've been such a good teacher to me, Shintaro."

"Teacher? I don't think I really taught you anything. Oh, hey, more squids incoming."

The moment Shintaro mentioned that, the windows of the mansion that loomed on-screen shattered, a swarm of multitentacled aliens slithering out of each one. The "squids" he mentioned, in other words. I wrapped my fingers around my controller and calmly began sniping them down.

Today we were playing *Pumpkin Shooter*, a free-to-play game with a Halloween motif. You chose your own character from a witch, a werewolf, some kind of Frankenstein-like thing, and so on, then you fought to defend Earth against a giant alien invasion. A little light on plot, maybe, but seeing it in action was a thrill. I loved it.

Playing it, you got the idea that the developers took a pretty direct approach. If monsters are scary, and aliens are scary, then mixing them together ought to be *super-double* scary. Shintaro still liked it, though. "Deep," he called it.

By the way, Ghoulish Gourd, the game's de-facto mascot, was a pretty useless power-up by default, but if you didn't mind shelling out for microtransactions, he'd fly over to the nearest alien horde and blow himself up. This selfless fighting spirit meant that players universally just called it

“the pumpkin bomb.”

That didn’t matter to me as much as Shintaro just mentioning I’d “gotten really good.” Receiving praise from Shintaro was an achievement in itself. It elated me as I fired a few more salvos into the next wave of squids.

“Y’know, if you keep that up, maybe you could even beat her next time. What was her name? Enomoto?”

“Huh? Oh, no way. Takane’s still way too tough for me, heh-heh-heh...”

“You think so? I dunno. You really got your moves down pat these days. I think you got at least a fighting chance. Why don’t you challenge her to a duel?”

That’s easy for you to say. But Takane (well, Ene, really)? She was on a whole different level. I’d seen videos of her in competitive tournaments, and what I saw made me doubt I had any chance.

Not that I couldn’t take her on, of course. I mean, I’d lose, but I could always try playing her anyway. But I didn’t want to yet. Why not? Well...

“Lemme guess. You’re afraid that if you lose real bad to her, she’ll never play you again, right?”

Bingo. It felt like one of the squids on-screen had wrapped a tentacle tightly around my heart.

“Well, that...that’s...part of it, but...Oh, it’s all riiight, though, okay? I’ll ask her when I feel like it! Give me a break!”

“Yeah, yeah. Not like it’s any of my business anyway...More squids.”

The warning was followed by the sound of a door creaking open. Not from the game, but from Shintaro’s room, through my headphones. Then, a girl’s voice. I began to get a little nervous.

“Hey, bro, can I talk to you for a sec?”

“Huh? Dude, are you stupid or something? I told you to knock before coming in! I’m kind of busy right now—”

“Ooh! You’re playing that game with the squids in it! Cool! I wanna play the squid game, too!”

Oh! This must have been Shintaro’s little sister I’d heard about. He said she liked “weird” things, didn’t she...?

“These squids are soooooo cute!”

Yep. It had to be her. But what did she want? Something related to Shintaro? “You can end the call if you want,” I said. No reply. He must’ve already removed his headset.

“Look, I’m playing with somebody right now. Can you just go away? You’re annoying me.”

“What’s with that? How come you’re willing to play with some random stranger, but not me? What’s so bad about me, huh?”

“Okay, well, one, you’re a total sore loser! You start crying and punching me and stuff. That’s not exactly fun for me, you know, putting up with you!”

Eesh, Shintaro. Kind of going too far, aren’t you? As I expected, his sister’s voice began to grow shaky. She wasn’t raising it yet, but I could tell she was angry.

“Is that what you want? Well, fine. I won’t play any games with you at all. Ever! For my whole life!”

“Yeah, do what you want. I don’t care. But if you come back later and ask to play, don’t expect me to say yes.”

Oh, Shintaro! That’s just being mean! You’ll make your sister cry! I craned my ears to find out what’d happen next. After a couple of sniffles, she shot back, her voice almost at a whisper:

“I—I actually stopped by a video arcade on the way home from school today. I wanted to practice a little. The owner came out and asked me if I wanted to be in some event they’re holding next week. He said he liked my voice, and maybe I could be a big star and things...I was kind of nervous about it, so I felt like I should ask you first...”

“Huuuh?! What the hell’s up with that?! He wants you to go up onstage or something? There’s no way you could—”

“But I’ve already decided to do it! I don’t need to listen to you anymore, bro!!”

Then, the slamming of a door echoed across my ears.

“Hey! Momo!” Shintaro cried out at the end, but there was no reply. The audio fell silent for a bit. Was he chasing her down? It seemed possible, but from the background noise I could pick up, it sounded like he was just sitting there, unsure what to do next. After a while I heard him say “Oh”

softly and pick his headset back up.

“...Uh, sorry. I forgot we were still on a call.”

“Oh, no problem. Man, your sister, though...”

He didn't respond at first. Maybe he was thinking about something. I decided to press on.

“Um, maybe you should try discussing things with your parents or something...?”

It seemed like a smart move to make, judging by their conversation.

“No,” Shintaro began. “If I told my parents that she went to an arcade, they'd probably ground her forever. Besides, I can't put up with every single one of her tantrums. If I did, like...all this wouldn't be...”

Shintaro sounded dead serious about it. Myself, though, I felt relieved. I admired him in a way. He was playing the big-brother role after all, wasn't he?

“Yeaah...Well, guess we'll just have to do something about it ourselves.”

“...Huh?”

I closed the game window and brought up my calendar to check what dates the next weekend fell on. Then I opened a browser window. In the search box, I typed the date, the name of the local neighborhood, “arcade,” and “event.”

There was only one relevant result. Man, was having a computer ever helpful.

“All right, Shintaro. Wanna hit the arcade next weekend?”

*

“...Oh! There she is, Haruka! Right there!”

“Huh? Where, where?”

“Right over there! Um...I can't...ngh...”

Shintaro tried his hardest to lift his head above the crowd and point in a certain direction. He couldn't pull it off before the waves of people claimed him. I had no idea where he had been trying to point.

It was hard enough to keep myself from falling down and getting trampled. For Shintaro, a fair bit shorter than me, it must have been a harrowing ordeal.

When I heard the term "video arcade," I was expecting someplace a bit cozier; lines of machines, little kids running around with a pile of 100-yen coins in their balled fists, that kind of thing. That didn't describe this place. It was people, people, people, people, a few game machines, people, people, people...I mean, what the hell? Was this really a video arcade? It felt more like a *people* arcade.

"...Dahh, I lost her! What's with all these people...Oww!! Hang on, I caught on a corner ...No, no, sorry to bump into you..."

Shintaro apologized as he let the crowds swallow him for good. If we got separated here, we'd probably not see each other for the rest of the day.

"Shintaro?!" I shouted, frustrated. "Where are you?! Shintaro?!"

I saw him just barely erupt above the surface, gasping for air.

"Aghh! This is insane! And quit running around, Haruka! You're so huge, I promise I'll never lose you!"

True. My height usually earned me nothing but panicked stares from toddlers and an occasional bump on the head against the ceiling, but at times like these, it was pretty useful. I stretched out as high as I could and looked around. Shintaro was pointing...toward the main stage, it looked like. If Momo was in this building, I assumed that's where we'd find her.

"Haruka, this is totally nuts. If Momo gets put onstage in front of this huge crowd, she's gonna..."

Shintaro placed a hand against his forehead in anguish.

"Y-yeah, I know what you mean. Um, how much time do we have until the event begins? ...Twenty minutes?"

"There's still twenty minutes?! Agh...nh...M-Momo! Momoooo!"

“Whoa! Chill out, Shintaro! ...Oh! Sorry, I’m okay! No, I’m not a creepy weirdo or anything...”

It turned out that Momo was chosen to join a major event at an oversized video arcade and entertainment center, one of the largest in the area. I guess they were debuting an arcade version of *Pumpkin Shooter*, the game we were playing not too long ago, and the whole place was already in party mode...Well, not just party *mode*. It *was* a party. The whole place.

This was in part because, borrowing from the game’s Halloween theme, the event was also a costume contest. You had to be wearing one to get in, which only made things more difficult. We were nowhere near Halloween on the calendar, so I figured there wouldn’t be that many participants. Boy, was I wrong. It made me realize, all over again, how little I actually knew about the world.

So, anyway, that was why everyone in the arcade was dressed up like one monster or another. That included me and Shintaro, of course—we did our homework on the event in advance. He was Dracula, and I was Frankenstein. We got a picture of ourselves just a bit ago, but to be frank, we were almost scarily perfect for our roles.

But if this was going to be some kind of mega-event, why did the arcade manager ask some girl milling around the machines to participate? I had trouble figuring out what he was thinking. Maybe Momo had some kind of special ability to hypnotize people at a glance. I didn’t know. It could all be some huge misunderstanding on Momo’s part, too—and if it was, no harm, no foul. I’d just get Shintaro to take her back home, and we’d be clear.

On the other hand, if she really was emceeing this event, I’d be a little concerned. That depended on the nature of the job, of course, but if worse came to worst, her parents—or the police—might need to get involved.

Either way, before things got too hairy, we needed to find Momo.

“Haruka...are you thirsty...?”

I looked around to find Shintaro speaking to me, soft as a buzzing mosquito. All the people around us were making it uncomfortably hot. I could understand where he was coming from.

“Yeah, but...Look, look at that line! We’d probably have to wait half an hour to buy anything...!”

“Ugghh...You gotta be kidding me...”

Shintaro hung his head, drained of all strength. The light was already gone from his eyes. *Yikes. If this keeps up, Shintaro’s gonna be in trouble before Momo is.*

Between this enormous crowd and everyone dressed in disguises, trying to search for someone right now was a fool’s errand. I recalled what my friend told me earlier:

“Shintaro, you said you saw her a few minutes ago...?”

“Yeah. I think it was her, but...”

“Do you know what kind of costume she’s wearing? I can look for it!”

Shintaro shook his head. “No, I don’t know. I haven’t even seen her once since that fight we had...”

“Huh? Then how’d you know it was her in the middle of this crowd?”

“Oh, easy. Just look for craziest-dressed person in the room.” The way he put it suggested that he thought it was the most obvious thing in the world.

The “craziest-dressed”? Kind of a matter of personal opinion, wasn’t it? I couldn’t really use *that* as a baseline for my search. I didn’t know how to respond to it, so I turned my head around a few times, trying to spot the weirdest costume I could. It seemed like a silly idea, but...

...Whoa. What’s that crazy outfit?

“...Wait, I got it! Sh-Shintaro, I found someone really crazy. What’s *up* with that thing?! There’re pig’s feet coming out of the head...”

“Oh, thank God! That’s her! Let’s get going.”

“Going? We have to go *near* that thing?!”

Faced with this costume, literally the craziest costume on the planet, I could feel every hair on my body stand on end. It was like I was bewitched by some sort of curse. Just approaching it made me fear for my life.

But even as I hesitated, Shintaro was cutting through the crowd. I couldn’t just stand there, so I decided to follow him.

We managed to make it about thirty feet from her when the cell phone in my pocket began to ring. The crowd made it difficult to even reach down to retrieve it, but I somehow managed to jam a hand down there, fetch the phone, and bring it up to my eyes.

Takane's name was on the screen. I pressed the button, wondering what was up.

"H-hello?"

"Hello? Hey, Haruka. Wow, where are you? Sounds pretty loud."

Between the roar of the crowd and the music piped in through the PA system, the arcade was extremely loud. I cupped the bottom of the phone with my hand to try to block whatever sound I could.

"Sorry! What's up, though?"

"Well, today's Ayano's birthday, so...Did you know that?"

It was news to me.

"No, not at all! In fact, how'd you know, Takane?"

"Surprised huh? We've actually been texting buds for a little bit. Hee-hee-hee!"

Takane sounded weirdly happy about this. *Texting buds* itself was a new term to my ears.

"So anyway, I thought we'd celebrate it today, but what're you doing right now?"

"Huh?! Well, I'm, uh..."

It'd be easy to just tell her I was out with Shintaro, but they were still bitter rivals. If I was too indiscreet about revealing that, it could lead to some rough sailing. The way Takane put it, she was organizing some kind of party. I wanted to attend, as long as it was after we took care of Momo, but I had no idea how much time that'd take.

Now what? What should I say...?!

"...Um, I'm sorry. I, er...I'm out shopping a little."

"Wh-why're you phrasing it all weird...? All right, though. I gotcha."

Ugh! I just told such a stupid lie! Takane, I'm sorry! There's nothing I can do about it. If I told you the truth, I know it'd just put you in a crappy mood again.

"...Oh! Right, I had one more thing I wanted to ask you. Can I?"

“Hyah?! What is it?!”

“Well...” She lowered her voice. “*Like, he’s there with you, isn’t he?*”

Putting it like that, I assumed she meant Shintaro. I nodded.

“Yeah, but what’s up?”

“Well, I guess Ayano told him when her birthday was, too, before. She’s acting really restless today, so I feel kinda bad for her, so...You know, I doubt he forgot or anything, but I just wanted to see if he had some kind of present for her. Did he mention something about that?”

...If Shintaro was here right now, then no way did he remember.

“I—I got no idea! No, none at all!”

“...Oh. Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t...Oh, here we are!”

“Here we are”? Was she going out somewhere? Come to think of it, I was starting to hear some background noise from Takane’s side of the line, too.

“Anyway, I’m gonna be out with Ayano for a bit. Hee-hee! Hope you don’t regret your shopping trip now, Haruka. If you were free, I was gonna take you someplace you would’ve died to visit!”

“Oh?” I was starting to feel tremendously guilty about all this. “Uh, heh-heh-heh...Next time, then, okay?”

“Not gonna happennnnn!” she lilted at me before hanging up.

I could feel the tension suddenly drain from my body.

Why did I have to lie to her like that? I couldn’t have handled that any less smoothly. *Let’s just get this deal with Momo wrapped up so I can go to their party or whatever.* Even if I showed up a bit late, I knew where Ayano lived, so...

I proceeded onward until I spotted Shintaro standing near the wall off one side of the main event stage, head hung down. I ran up to see what the deal was. Apparently he had tripped over a cord and accidentally unplugged the lighting system they were about to use for the event. It didn’t look like anything serious, but one of the stage crew was in the midst of giving him a little lecture about it.

However, my attention was focused less on the apologetic Shintaro and

more on the girl nearby, grimly glaring at him.

She had what looked like pig's feet growing out of her head, and her outfit was the same one I spotted before. At long last, it was Momo.

Once the crewman left, Momo went up to Shintaro and started talking to him about something.

Whatever Momo said to him made Shintaro's face erupt in abject sadness. She then left him standing there, blending back into the crowd.

I rushed up to Shintaro and patted his shoulder.

"You all right, Shintaro?"

"Oh, Haruka...I'm in the doghouse now..."

He must have been talking about the lighting. It riled up Momo, too; that much I knew without asking.

"Well, hey, what's done is done, okay? I actually wanted to talk to you about something else, but what did Momo just say to you?"

Shintaro's face seemed to be drained of all life as he furtively moved his lips.

"She was like, 'Why did you come here if you were just gonna make trouble for me?' Then she was like, 'I'm never gonna call you my brother again'...Heh-heh. It just makes you laugh, huh?"

Then he slid down, skidding against the wall as he slumped to the ground like a burnt-out husk.

"I...I'm not even her brother anymore. I can't believe this. Ahh... Haruka, how am I looking right now?"

Well...Um. Pretty gross, Shintaro. Pretty gross.

"Ugh, I'm dead. You can just go ahead and call me 'Shintaro the Ex-Brother' from now on, Haruka. Ha-ha-ha..."

I think I won't, thanks.

As a nickname, I couldn't stomach the idea of it.

It surprised me, though, to see how much his sister affected his emotions after all. I didn't have any brothers or sisters so I couldn't commiserate, but even I could tell it was tough for him.

I crouched down next to Shintaro and flashed a smile.

“Well, there’s no point just sitting here, you know? Besides, we need to convince Momo to get outta here, remember?”

“Oh...Yeah, actually, I guess we had the wrong idea the whole time. Check that out...”

Shintaro pointed at the main stage. From the other side, a woman dressed like a somewhat provocative nightclub bunny jumped into the spotlight, accompanied by Ghoulish Gourd, the ol’ pumpkin bomb himself.

Once she was front and center, the bunny girl breezily reminded the audience that it was almost time to sign up for the event. Checking the clock, I saw that only about ten minutes remained until things kicked off, but I didn’t see any role for Momo to play in this show. So maybe she just got it all wrong after all...?

As I pondered that, the guy in the Gourd costume struck a wacky pose and shouted “*Pump -kiiin!!*” to the audience. The crowd adored it. “You’re so cute!” I heard someone say.

...Hang on. I think I’ve heard that Ghoulish Gourd’s voice before.

“So I guess they hired Momo to do the voice for that ‘pump-kiiin’ thing, and that’s all she did. Apparently they didn’t have anyone else handy.”

I see. She was the big star of the show, in a way. Her voice was, at least. Which meant all our concerns about stage-show mishaps were probably for naught.

Which was great...but something about this still didn’t add up. There were already a million voice actors out there. Why would they just pick Momo off the street to handle that job?

“Yeah, what can I say?” Shintaro said, picking up on my concern. “This kind of crazy stuff...like, it just happens to her. It’s not normal.”

That may sound harsh on paper, but Shintaro didn’t mean it that way. There was no scorn or regret to his voice. And besides, he mentioned that before when we were searching for her—about her “propensity” for being easily spotted. For all I knew, maybe this really was the status quo for the two of them.

But it was nothing I had a chance of understanding, and Shintaro didn’t seem too eager to go into more detail. I decided to stand up and stop

thinking weird thoughts.

“Well, at least everything’s okay. You wanna do something else now?”

“Oh, you can do whatever. I’ve made you hang out with me long enough, besides. I just...”

Shintaro began to lightly bang his head against the wall.

“I’m no longer her brother, so I think I’m gonna turn into a wall or something instead...Man, this is pretty solid. You bastard.”

Oh, great. If you keep this up, we’ll have the cops here for reasons that have nothing to do with Momo. And you’ve completely forgotten about Ayano’s birthday, too, haven’t you, Shintaro? All you’re thinking about is walls and giving yourself a concussion with them.

Now what’ll I do? I can’t just leave him and go home.

Suddenly, I heard a louder cheer from the audience.

I looked up, wondering if the pumpkin had finally decided to explode, only to find that a giant “squid” trophy had popped up behind him. It was draped with a sash that read CHAMPION PRIZE. Wow. Tacky as all get-out. But then I remembered what Momo had said...

“H-hey! Hey, Shintaro, you think Momo might like that as a present?!”

The question was enough to make him stop beating a wall and turn his eyes to the stage.

“Yeah, maybe...Momo really goes nuts for that character, too...”

The arcade version of *Pumpkin Shooter* was a kind of tag team shooting game. We were both experienced players. If we teamed up, maybe we had a chance. The thought filled me with excitement. *Yeah! It’s not every day I can join a competition. We came all the way here and everything. It won’t hurt to try.*

“Let’s join in together, Shintaro! We can’t let this chance slip away from us!”

“Yeah. If you’re cool with it, then I...Oww.”

Shintaro let his hand dangle as he stood up. It looked like he must have twisted his wrist when he got tangled up in the light cord and fell down.

“Are...are you okay?!”

“Oh, sure. This is fine. Let’s just hurry up and get signed in...”

Only five minutes were left before the event started. There was no time to lose. Shintaro and I dove into the crowd. The registration desk was near the front entrance. If we hurried, we might just make it before the bell.

As we shuffled along, I had a sense of *déjà vu* as I passed by a pair of girls dressed like witches. I didn’t dwell on it, though. Their faces were blocked by their large hats anyway.



“Owww...owwwwww...I wanna go home.”

Shintaro’s voice was shaky as he rubbed his wrist.

“Just hang in there,” I replied softly. “We’re in the final match now...”

The championship round was about to take place on the main stage, currently drenched in a variety of colored lights.

As the bunny girl and the Ghoulish Gourd got the audience revved up, the four of us—including the team we were about to play against—were lined up front and center.

Having the two of us, Shintaro and me, up onstage like this...it was nothing short of a miracle. After all, with Shintaro’s wrist giving him too much pain midway to continue on as normal, it was pretty much up to me to take the reins and play the game two-on-one style.

But it somehow worked. Between our opponents making a litany of mistakes and one of them facing an emergency case of diarrhea in the middle of the match, I somehow managed to drag us all the way to the final.

Coincidence can be such an amazing thing sometimes. Really, it scares me.

I looked out of the corner of my eye at our opponents—Takane and Ayano, both dressed as witches. It brought home exactly how scary it was.

As we watched the semifinal round, realizing that the two of them were part of the championship threw us into a panic.

Why wouldn't it? It was Ayano's birthday, and not only were we playing in some video-game contest instead of spending it with her, I had just lied to Takane about it over the phone. There were obviously going to be repercussions.

I had no right to complain, even if they used their witch powers to transform me into a frog or something. I was seriously considering ditching the whole contest and going home, but I held my ground in the end. Something told me that if I suggested that to Shintaro, he'd try to become one with the wall again.

Getting seen here was *not* a smooth move. But I couldn't leave Momo and Shintaro's relationship in tatters like this. Thus, we stuck around, going for the utterly hopeless plan of somehow winning without letting them recognize us. This being a costume party, our masks were keeping us somewhat anonymous. If we were caught, it was all over—but given that we were all lined up onstage and Takane wasn't kicking at my shins, I figured it was so far, so good.

This mask, though. It felt like something more suited for a masquerade ball or something. It was incredibly fancy and well detailed. Hearing them comment about it right next to me (“Those guys look totally freaky, don't they?” “Shut up, Takane, there're gonna hear you! Hee-hee...”) was starting to mess up my mental game.

“Why did *they* have to be in on this...?” Shintaro whined, his voice still soft and shaky. He had shown up in a Dracula-style suit, but the domino mask he had later put on for insurance purposes made him look like a certain famous superhero from 1990s-era magical girl anime.

I, meanwhile, was in a Frankenstein outfit and mask. We were a pretty freaky-looking pair, I'll freely admit.

After the Ghoulish Gourd wrapped up his seemingly endless audience pump-up session, the hour of competition was finally upon us. Both teams were guided to their respective arcade cabinets and seated. We faced one another—me and Takane, Shintaro and Ayano—and while the video screens

prevented me from seeing Takane at all, it sounded like she was having fun chatting with Ayano.

I sat back in my chair and was just about to steady the grip on my gun controller when I noticed something.

“Sh-Shintaro?”

“Damn, my wrist hurts...What? What’d you say?”

“I...I’ve never played against Takane before...!”

Ene herself was right in front of me. The thought filled me with a mixture of joy and morbid fear. My hands began to quiver with excitement. I thought we had a half-decent chance at winning this, but now? Yeah right. Her entering the picture just changed everything. I wasn’t sure I could even fight her, much less defeat her.

Wait. No. I gotta get myself out of this headspace. Personally, I shouldn’t be caring if I lost or not—but *this* time, at least, I couldn’t afford to lose. *I’ve got to do this...somehow. Somehow.*

“...You’re gonna do fine, Haruka.”

I turned to see Shintaro looking back at me, doing his best to deal with the pain. “Just do it like you always do, and we got this”—he said with a smile when our eyes met—“so hang in there, okay?”

Simple as it was, that was enough to make the tension melt away from my shoulders.

“...Thanks. Let’s do it.”

Oh man, this is just like how the climax of every sports movie starts out.

If I wasn’t dressed up like some kind of masked stalker, it would’ve been one of the coolest moments of my life.

Well, nobody’s perfect.

The bunny girl gave the signal, and the stage suddenly went dark.

“Ready to win this?” I heard Takane say in the blackness.

“Uh-huh!” Ayano replied.

Nope. Sorry, but we’re not here to lose to you.

Just before it began, I turned to him one more time.

“We’ve got to win, Shintaro.”

“Yep.”



This must be what they mean when they say “grinning from ear to ear.”

Those were the only words that came to mind when I saw the smile on Momo’s face.

“Wow, bro! Are you really sure I can have this?”

“Dude, I’m not gonna say it again. But you gotta thank Haruka, too, okay?”

Momo turned toward me in response. “Thank you very much!” she said, bowing her head deeply.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” I said, trying to restrain myself as I returned the smile. I really didn’t need any thanks. The main MVP today was Shintaro, who kept plugging away, hands on the gun controller the whole time.

That, and that squid currently buried in Momo’s arms, too.

Me? I didn’t need anything.

It took a bit of time to change back into my regular clothes, but we managed to get out of the arcade while it was still bright and sunny out. We spotted a few costumed attendees on the road back to the rail station. They all looked a little embarrassed.

“Haruka, though...”

Takane leered at me.

“If something was up like that, don’t you think you should’ve just told me? Like, next time you lie to me, don’t expect any mercy.”

She was completely right. I had nothing to say in my defense. *I swear I’ll never lie again.*

“Oh, it’s fine, isn’t it, Takane? It got us all together in the end, at least!”

Ayano, meanwhile, was in high spirits. Not only did she get to see Shintaro after all, but she also had a chance to introduce herself to Momo.

Takane, meanwhile, was more of a mixed bag, incapable of anything but

nodding.

“Yeah, but...Like, why did you hide that we were playing against him? *That’s* the thing that bothers me the most!”

Her finger, and her eyes, were pointed right at Shintaro. Shintaro stared back, ready to take this fight another round.

“Uhh? What’s with you, lady? You’re just all whiny because you can’t stand how Haruka beat you, huh?”

“Whaaa?! Are you *kidding* me?! And how can you even call that losing?! I was just startled because Haruka called my name out in the middle of the freakin’ match! Besides, how come *you* get away with saying stuff like that? You want Ayano to beat the snot outta you?!”



“What d’you want from me? My wrist was hurt! We had to do something! And besides, we won! I don’t see how *you* get off complaining about it. That’s just pathetic!”

The sparks were flying between the two of them as Momo looked on blankly.

“Momo, what’s your favorite food?” Ayano asked, frantically trying to find some way, any way, to steer the conversation toward calmer waters.

“Oh, I like eating those bags of dried sardines,” Momo replied. That answer wasn’t going to be of much help to Ayano, but there you go.

And so we carried on and shouted at each other, all the way to Takane’s house.

Ayano’s birthday party was about to begin. A little late, though. I felt bad for making Kousuke and the gang wait, but oh well. We’d probably just chat for a little while longer and call it a day...

But then I realized.

This is the last time I’ll ever get to celebrate Ayano’s birthday. Right. That won’t happen for me next year.

Oof. Why did I forget about that? Weird. I actually thought “this” was gonna just keep on going forever. I’ve never felt like this over a moment in my life before. Why...?

...No. I can’t let myself overthink this. I can’t do anything about it.

I winced in pain as Takane punched me from the side.

Apparently I forgot to ask about something. She puffed up her cheeks, flush with rage. I gave her a wry smile and replied. Ayano snickered as I did, and Shintaro, for his part, seemed to be enjoying himself.

Yeah. Don’t think about it. Just sit back and take in the scene before you.
I moved on, beaming, as I told that to myself.

Yes.

Even as I turned my eyes away from the despair that covered everything around me.

LOST DAYS · 7

A lone contrail from a jetliner extended across the sky.

The outside world, as seen through my bedroom window, was a contrast between the wide-open blue and the fragrant green spread below it.

The insect calls, almost a little too loud, sounded pleasant to my ears. Somewhere along the line, summer happened—and now it had taken root.

How much time had passed since that day? The first time I played competitively against her?

...Man, I must be starting to lose it. It feels like I'm spending more and more of each day staring into space. I guess it's really true—if you don't keep your body moving, your brain starts to go on you, too. But that would imply that professional athletes are all geniuses, and I know that's not the case.

I sat on my bed, letting my mind ruminate on this for a moment.

Suddenly, the door opened, accompanied by Shintaro's cheerful voice.

"Helloooo...Oh! Hey, Haruka, you're lookin' pretty good today."

"Hi, Shintaro. Thanks for coming. Was it hot outside?"

"Oh man, 'hot' doesn't even *begin* to describe it," he said as he sat on the floor, grabbing his collar and flicking it up and down to fan his chest. "It's gotta be the hottest day of the year so far."

He couldn't have been lying. I watched the sweat from his forehead form small streams down his body, feeling a little sorry to make him go through the effort.

"And you still got a hoodie on, huh? You sure are consistent with that, at least. Don't get dehydrated or anything, okay?"

"Ha-ha! I'll be fine. Oh, here, I got a souvenir for you."

Shintaro took a box out of the paper bag he carried. It contained a German *Baumkuchen* cake. The design on the box jogged so many

memories that I couldn't help but chuckle at it.

Shintaro raised an eyebrow. "Oh, uh, don't you like this?"

"Oh, no, it's great! I can't wait to try it out."

I remembered how many days into summer break we were. This was day number...ten? Yeah, that should be it.

Shintaro's spent a lot of his break visiting me. I felt guilty, having him walk over here in the summer heat—but, really, his visits were one of the few things I had left to enjoy.

"Is that the kind of thing you want to spend your money on, though, Shintaro? I thought you weren't a huge fan of sugary foods, and here you bought this whole big cake..."

"Huh? Oh, I'm starting to dig 'em a little more now," he replied as he helped himself to a slice. "I think I was just being a picky eater, is all... Ooh, this is good."

That was a relief to see. It didn't look like he was putting on an act, either.

"Hey, didn't you say that the first time you drank that soda? I remember how funny I thought that was. I don't think I've seen anyone enjoy a soda more than you did at that exact moment."

Shintaro scratched his head out of embarrassment.

"Well, I meant it, dude! That really amazed me. I mean, I pretty much never go a day without a can any longer. Guess I owe you one for that, Haruka."

"Owe me?" I laughed. "Yeah, I guess you owe me for all the cavities you're gonna get, Shintaro."

Shintaro laughed. "Guess so!"

Here we were, just hanging out with each other, talking with each other, laughing at each other.

Carrying on in this way made it feel like, hey, we might just be friends after all. I didn't know exactly how "friends" were meant to be defined, but if Shintaro wasn't a friend by now, I doubted I even needed any.

I'd put Takane on my friend list, too.

But...maybe I shouldn't be so blunt with that. If I do, it's like I get this bad aftertaste in my throat. Hmm...What, then? Maybe it really is... that kind of thing. But I just can never get proactive with things like that. Like, it felt like I have no right to say it.

...After all, I was due to die pretty soon.

I turned my ears to the insects' buzzing.

Something about the situation suggested that it'd be the perfect time for me to die. If it were silent outside, a carpet of snow on the ground, I'd probably be a lot more freaked out over it.

Instead, whenever I catch myself getting lost in my own thoughts, I turn my ears to the cicadas, just like this. It's like they're constantly shouting at me, "We're alive! We're alive!"—and it puts me just that much more at ease about things.

The nights, though, were still hard. Once I started thinking to myself, "I wonder what dying's like," it was all over. Thinking about how I was about to go into this state that nobody knew very much about brought on a sense of nausea I had trouble shaking.

First my breathing would stop. Then my heart. My blood flow would freeze in place. Then my brain would stop working.

After that, there'd be no chatting, no laughing, no seeing or hearing or even eating. In fact...I wouldn't even be able to do this. Sitting and thinking about things. What would that be like? I couldn't even imagine it.

The idea of a state called "death" that I couldn't even imagine scared me beyond anything else.

Come to think of it, I used to really believe there was something out there called "heaven." There, far away on the other edge of the sky, was a picture-perfect place where everyone lived happily ever after. And I'd get to see Shintaro and everybody else there, too. I was just hitting the trail a little early.

...But there's no way that place actually exists.

Who ever said it did? *It's not like anybody's been there. They're all a bunch of liars. Liars, liars, liars...!*

I was sure of it. *After you die, there's nothing but darkness. A world of darkness and nothing else, where you were all alone...*

“...Haruka?”

Shintaro's voice whisked me back to reality. I must have lost myself in my thoughts again. My heart was loud in my ears, my breathing labored.

Since I couldn't give him a reply, Shintaro stood up and set off for the door. He must've been trying to alert someone. I grabbed his arm to stop him.

“I'm okay...you know. This...this is still on the okay side...”

“B-but, Haruka, you look like you're in pain...”

Shintaro appeared grievously concerned.

This was probably mean, given his worrying and all, but seeing that made me incredibly happy.

I immediately hated myself for it. Losing myself in thought, letting it pain me, putting all this burden on a close friend of mine...Just miserable.

I took several deep breaths. I could feel the juices flowing again. Not that I had much in the way of “juices” left.

Talking was starting to pain me a little, so I fell silent for a while afterward. Shintaro didn't say anything, either, looking out the window with me.

The color of the sky changed with the approach of dusk. The cawing of crows began to overtake the crying of insects.

“...Sure hope you get better soon.”

Shintaro just blurted it out, his voice at a whisper. They were his first words in a while. I wasn't sure how to respond.

It should've been simple. Just a little “Yeah, I'll try my best” and everything would be fine. But somehow, I just couldn't will those few, ridiculously simple words up from my throat.

“...I'm never gonna.”

I couldn't see Shintaro's face. I didn't want to anyway, and I didn't want to show mine, either.

"...Wh-what're you talking about, Haruka? It's just getting a little hot lately, is all. That's why you're—"

"No...No, Shintaro."

I swore to myself that I'd never say it, but I just couldn't find a way to stop the words from flowing.

"...I'm going to die. I don't think I'm gonna last another month. I knew that long before we came to know each other, Shintaro."

There was no response from him. I tried to keep it together as I opened my mouth again.

"Shintaro," I said. "I've never had a friend as good as you in my whole life. That's why I want you to be happy. No matter what kind of bad things you have to deal with, I want you to live the full life that I couldn't."

The evening sky darkened. The room was bathed in an orange light.

I began to regret talking about myself for so long. As expected, Shintaro couldn't figure out how to respond.

It was getting late. I had to say something.

"I'm sorry, Shintaro. Do you think you could maybe head home for today? It's getting pretty—"

"I..."

I instinctively turned toward the quivering voice. I saw my friend shedding large, wet tears.

"I...I don't want you to...to die, Haruka...!"

Shintaro's vocabulary far outclassed mine. He could belittle you with his intelligence, and he could also act so nice, out of consideration to you.

I know. I knew that. He was my friend.

"Me neither..."

That's why I could no longer hold anything back against Shintaro's

words.

“I...I don’t want to die either...! Why...? Why me?! This is just crazy...”

The tears left stains on my comforter. I don’t think I had ever cried in front of anyone else before.

“My body’s getting more and more out of whack...,” I spat out. “I can’t even tell what food tastes like anymore. I’m scared...I’m so scared. Somebody, help me...!”

I buried my face in my comforter and cried.

Shintaro patted my back for a little while. I’m not sure how long. I fell asleep somewhere along the line, and when I woke up, it was night.

Realizing that Shintaro was asleep on the carpet by the bed, I placed a blanket over him and went outside for a bit.

I think I just walked around aimlessly for a while, with no particular destination in mind. After that, I thought about the last thing I would ever do and what I needed that to be.

I wasn’t thinking, “I need to leave my mark on the world” or anything as epic as that. But something drove me to go to school.

Ah, right. There *was* a *Dead Bullet -1989-* tournament coming up.

I created the account and everything. It’d be kinda cool if Konoha could challenge Ene to a match. Just to wrap things up.

I pondered this as I walked down the night streets.

These might be the most precious moments of time left in my life. But I didn’t feel like I was wasting a single second.



LOST DAYS · 8

Today, August 15, was a perfectly average day. It was a good one, I thought.

The news this morning said it'd be an easygoing kind of day. Completely normal temperatures for this season. They were absolutely right.

So I had nothing to complain about. If I had to come up with something, I guess I'd like to see the sunset just one more time, right at the end.

Oh, and if I could add something else, joining that tournament would've been nice. But there's no reason to be greedy.

...Life, I figured, was just kind of short like that.

I heard the ambulance siren and felt some light bumping below me. I heard Takane's voice as I fell in and out of consciousness. Probably stuff like "It's all right" and "Hang in there" and so on. Earlier, I was in so much pain that I was incapable of focusing on anything else. Now, though, I couldn't feel anything at all.

It was funny. It didn't feel like I was cured. It was weird, but it felt more like it all just *disappeared*.

If I had to guess, the part of me that feels pain was probably dead. I had no way of confirming this, but thinking about it made me feel a little lonely.

The sounds around me seemed to echo mindlessly in my ears, and soon I could only pick up on the barest nuances of Takane's words. What did she say? I didn't know. She sounded real sad, though.

Ahhh, I'm sorry, Takane. I'm really sorry. I've received so much from you, but I couldn't give anything in return.

I bet you're angry about it. Well, you can be, if you want. You can punch

me, even. If it helps you get over it, you can do anything you like.

Oh, but don't take it out too much on people besides me. You might run into all kinds of wonderful people later on in life. You need to treat them with the care they'll deserve.

Yeah. That's right. You're a kind, gentle girl, Takane. You need to keep on smiling. You need to be happy.

So please, Takane. Stop crying...

Once the final echoes faded away, I no longer felt anything.

This was exactly the kind of silence I feared the most, but now that I was faced with the full brunt of it, it was nothing.

So this was "dying"?

No. If I was still thinking about stuff like this, I guess I wasn't quite there yet.

I didn't see my life flash before my eyes, or any other handy guidepost showing where I was in the process. In fact, I wasn't exactly sure what was going on.

But I suppose my thoughts would disappear before too long. I wouldn't be able to think about anything else, and then...

...No.

I just can't accept this. I don't want to die.

What's going to happen to me now? Hey, Takane, are you still near me? If you are, tell me. Come on. Tell me...

Takane, Shintaro, Ayano, Mr. Tateyama...

I wanted to be together with all of you for longer. I wanted to play around with you guys so much more.

I didn't want to be born in this weak, broken body. If I was stronger...as strong as the hero of a video game, I could've been with all of you forever...

Forever...with all of you...

“Is that what you want, foolish human?”

Where did that come from? Those words that so suddenly filled the darkness?

I tried to think about it, but then my consciousness shut off, like somebody unplugged the cord.

*

—My life is over, my senses have disappeared, but *I* am still here. What *am* I?

The pure white space spread out around me in all directions. I was surrounded by a dizzyingly large array of IV drips. I was on a bed. I was there.

I couldn't move. It was like someone had stitched me right into the bed. All I felt there was my consciousness.

This wasn't "reality." I was dead.

It didn't take long for that to dawn on me.

But no matter how I tried to justify it, this didn't seem like "heaven." So what was it...?

“I have heard your wish, human.”

The voice boomed from nowhere in particular. It sounded like human speech, but it wasn't. It was a low guttural tone, one that made me sick. And yet, I was still able to interpret it as human language.

“My wish? Who are you...?”

The moment I tried to ask, I noticed someone familiar standing beside my bed. My voice froze.

“It is your own body. Why are you so surprised? This is exactly what you always wanted. Your ideal body.”

The white hair. The black collar. This was Konoha, the game avatar I created for myself.

“Wh-why is Konoha here...? What do you mean, *this* is my body?”

Konoha’s lifeless eyes stared at me. Then, inside my head, I suddenly saw my own form on the bed, as seen through Konoha’s eyes.

My mind was forced to comprehend it. *This...is me*. “Something” had entered my body, and I had been forced out of it.

“Is this not what you hoped for? You wanted a strong body. Now your wish is granted. A shame that it seems to have rejected your meager ‘spirit.’”

My body has become “Konoha”? “Konoha” kicked me out?

That’s insane. That wasn’t what I’d “wished” for at all.

“N-no! That’s not it!! My wish was to be with everyone. With all my friends!”

“Ah. Yes. You’re right.” The voice droned, a hint of supreme self-satisfaction behind it. “Let me do this, then.”

The next moment, the ground Konoha stood on turned black, rose up, and started to swallow him. Konoha did nothing to defend himself.

“Wh-what’re you doing?! Stop...! Stop it!!”

“He is going to your ‘friends.’ And let me say, I am very glad that was your wish for me. Even a pile of ‘embers’ like you has a ‘master.’ If you do not wish for anything, I cannot ‘fulfill’ anything.”

Konoha’s eyes continued to look at me.

My face, as seen in my head, was transformed into a mask of wild desperation.

Oh. So *that* was it.

The owner of this voice, under the pretense of granting me a wish, had snatched away my body. And now he was trying to take it to the real world.

“What’re you gonna do with it? Over in the real world?”

“Oh, this is just a ‘trait’ of the system. We are being called by the ‘goddess,’ and it is *your* wishes that set the whole system into motion. What I do with it depends entirely on you.”

“...That’s terrible.”

“How could you say that? There are many far more terrible than me. Wasn’t one of them the main reason you came here?”

By the time the voice stopped, “Konoha” was completely swallowed by the black.

The main reason?

There couldn’t have been any “main” cause of death besides my illness. What was the voice talking about?

After a few moments of silence, a sound rang out in my mind. I instinctively realized this was what “Konoha” was hearing.

It was muffled, like he was underwater, and it sounded like some kind of machine humming along. Then: someone’s sneering laugh. The tone of voice was completely off-kilter, so I didn’t understand who it was for a second, but then I realized in the next instant.

“Mr. Tateyama...?”

That voice definitely belonged to my teacher. But why?

“...You *did* want it, didn’t you? A stronger body.”

Mr. Tateyama’s voice wasn’t the laid-back, friendly one I remembered. It was cold, calculating, like the guttural drone from before.

“That’s why I chose you. Good thing ‘Awakening’ just waltzed right in for me, too...Phase One looks like a success, anyway.”

Whether he knew I was hearing him, I couldn’t say.

“Ha-ha! I wasn’t expecting results like this on the first try. The year I spent preparing for this certainly seems worth it now...But let me tell you, it was rough! I mean, someone who can’t stop sleeping *and* someone with a weakened body? Throwing both of you in there at the same time...What a pain in the ass *that* was.”

Just then, images came back into my mind. Konoha must have opened his eyes.

It was dark, but I could see a large array of monitors, of all different

sizes. It looked like some kind of lab. Just as I'd surmised, Mr. Tateyama was there, and behind him was...No, it couldn't be...!

“Oh, are you awake, Konoha? Well, sorry. I know you're here to see your friends and all, but...”

The body of Takane, laid down behind my teacher, shocked me into silence.

“Sad to say, the friend you want to ‘play around’ with so much...Well, she's dead.”

DAZE2

It was a long, long tale, but oddly, it didn't seem like any time was passing at all.

That might be because we were stuck in this space. Or maybe it was because everything Haruka said was so fresh that it drew me in, making me forget all about the passage of time.

After he finished, Haruka sighed softly and looked back toward me.

"...Sorry that went on for so long, I guess."

I shook my head. I tried to say something, too, but I couldn't come up with anything decent. Just like back then, come to think of it. When Haruka revealed his illness to me at his place. I had nothing for him then, either. I had just frozen.

Two years, and I haven't grown at all since then.

But I had to say something. I selected a few words and brought them to my lips.

"Um...That's amazing. I can't believe *you* were the guy behind Konoha..."

Haruka looked away bashfully. "Sorry I couldn't tell you over on the other side," he apologized. Judging by the story, though, I don't think he ever had the ability. Konoha had his own personality. *He* was the one moving Haruka's body around right now.

Listening to Haruka's story must have jogged my memory a little. I began to remember the broad outlines of how I came here.

How I lived out the two years since Haruka died.

I dropped out of school. I holed up in my room. Enomoto somehow transformed into this ball of wicked energy and set up shop inside my

computer. I still haven't forgiven her for that. Then I met the Blindfold Gang...As I recalled it, I couldn't believe that I somehow forgot about everything. It was all just so surreal.

Oh yeah. I *joined* the Mekakushi-Dan. And I needed to get back fast, so I could help out with Operation: Conquer Kagerou Daze or whatever it was.

I had to break out of here as soon as possible. But I was missing one vital key. One final thing I still couldn't recall.

The day we went to Marie's house. My memories from the day after that until I'd arrived here...For some reason, I just couldn't call it up. Which bothered me.

"...Shintaro. I told you at the start that there's something I need to 'clear up.' You remember that?"

"Yeah...Yeah, you mentioned it. Did your story have part of that?"

"No, it didn't. I'm gonna talk about it now..."

Haruka paused, composing himself, then spoke anew—

"You said you don't remember why you came here. Is that...really true?"

Really true? I arched my eyebrows.

"Uh, sure it is. What, are you doubting me? Why do you ask?"

Haruka's face immediately darkened.

"I mean, there's no way you *couldn't* remember, the moment you looked at my face. You don't have to lie to make me feel better..."

"Huhh? No, uh...Like, I totally don't know what you're talking about. And more than anything right now, I really want to know!"

"You're been acting strange this whole time, besides. You see what kind of screwed up place we're in. How can you act all composed like that? It's weird."

...It's fine, Haruka. You don't have to say it.

"Come on, Shintaro. You gotta remember it. Besides..."

...No. Please don't say it. You can't...!

“... You died when I XXXXXed you, didn’t you?”



A bolt of pain shot across my stopped heart.
It was like he was warning me never to forget about it.

“So please, Shintaro. You need to kill Konoha...You need to kill me.
Before this whole story ends with a Game Over...”

Then Haruka cried, just like he did on that summer day.

I was there, standing motionless, right in the middle of the Kagerou Daze.

What the hell could I ever do? I couldn't save a single one of them. So, what...?

AFTERWORD

Where Your Eyes Don't Go

Jin here. It's an honor to have you holding *Kagerou Daze VI -Over the Dimension-*.

In the afterword to the last volume, *Kagerou Daze V -The Deceiving-*, I wrote the following: "I think we'll be able to get Volume VI released before too long." Tee-hee! Check it, check it, *check* it, dudes and dudettes!! It's been over a year since then.

...What? What happened to me? Well...I mean, *ugh*, it's a year. A whole year. In hamster terms, that's, like, half of your life. I really can't believe this. I'm producing these books far too slowly. I bet you'd just like to reach through these pages and wring my neck, don't you? Don't you? Well, (falling on hands and knees) I sincerely apologize about this.

Although, in my own defense, it's been a busy year. There's been the anime, the live shows, and all the music production I've been doing. I'll make an effort to get the pace going a bit more quickly, so I'd appreciate it (he said, tearfully) if you didn't dump me by the side of the road just yet.

So, to everyone holding this volume in their hands—once again, sorry. Volume VI is done.

The hero this time around was Noted Shy Kid, Haruka. This character was, shall we say, a challenge to write. It was the first time I ever tackled him really, but trying to figure out how to fully portray the "pureness" of his personality was a real bear. What do you want from me, after all? When I'm writing, I'm in a place that's about as nonpure as nonpure can be. Positively *evil*, in fact.

Thus, while I wrote this, I shouted to myself, “What would Haruka say in this situation?! What?! Gaaaahhh!!” on more than a couple occasions.

When he and Ayano first met, the first line I had for Haruka was, “Dude, you’re hot, are you on Snapchat?” Sadly, my editor—you’d recognize him on the street, he’s the one in the iron mask—was about ready to take a pair of pliers and rip my fingernails off with them, so it was rewrite time. And *here* I thought I’d be allowed to have a little *fun* for a change!

I can’t help but foster a fondness for my characters as I write for them, though. Nowadays, I’m head over heels in love with Haruka.

The latter half of the story has a scene where Shintaro visits him on his deathbed, but if anything, I wish I was the one dropping by instead.

“Wow, Haruka, you’re looking pretty chipper today!”

“Thanks for braving the heat to visit me, Jin.”

“Aww, no worries, pal!” [smirk]

It would’ve been *awesome*. Why couldn’t I have just tossed myself - *Over the Dimension-*, I wonder? When’re they gonna invent that app for me?

Regardless, I’m now here, writing the afterword to the latest volume... but I’m actually in a little bit of trouble.

Uhhh, well, I’m homeless (gasp!).

I was so busy that I wasn’t able to find a new place to rent before the lease on my old one expired. Thanks to that, I’m currently staying inside a room in the office, where I shackled myself to the chair so I could write this novel. It’s, uh, not ideal.

My heart goes out to all the employees here, too. You see, when I write a novel, I usually hole myself up in my room, just writing on and on and on until I’m done. There’s no hard and fast daily schedule to speak of, so there can be times where I’m writing for ten hours a day, or even more if I’m not careful.

This results in a lot of what I will give the fancy name of “garbaggio” piling up around the room. I have to eat, too, so if I don’t clean that up, the

“smellzio” gets pretty bad, too. Having that kind of thing occupy an entire room in an office building...I’m sure it’s not all that tolerable, no. I can already feel all the “hatred-eo” from the rest of the staff. Sorry, guys. Really.

So. I know I was keepin’ it a bit real for the past couple paragraphs, but I still have to remind you that I couldn’t write this without the kind support of everyone around me. I really can’t say enough good things about Sidu, whose trendy and attractive drawings decorate every volume of this series.

I know, I know. I really feel like I need to work harder on this. And I will.

Priority one is to get a new apartment, but priority two is to get working on Volume VII right away.

This volume ended with Shintaro in a situation where we’ve got no idea what’s going on with him, after all. I’ll try to resolve that in the next volume, so keep an eye out for it.

I’d also like to try tackling a spin-off volume sometime, like I hinted at in the previous volume. The main story comes first of course, but...

I actually discussed this with the editor a bit ago. It went like this:

Me: “I’d like to make a spin-off series with [censored] as the main character, but...”

Editor: “You dumbass!” [his way of sayin, “Sure, great!”]

Me: “Oh, Mr. Editor...[whine, whine, lick]”

I think that’s how it went, anyway. So keep an eye out for that, too, but not too keen of one, if you know what I mean. In fact, if you ever thought to yourself, “I want to read more about *this* guy!” let me know. I’d love to hear your feedback.

So! I’ll do my best to get the next volume out quick, so here’s to the future!

JIN (Shizen no Teki-P)

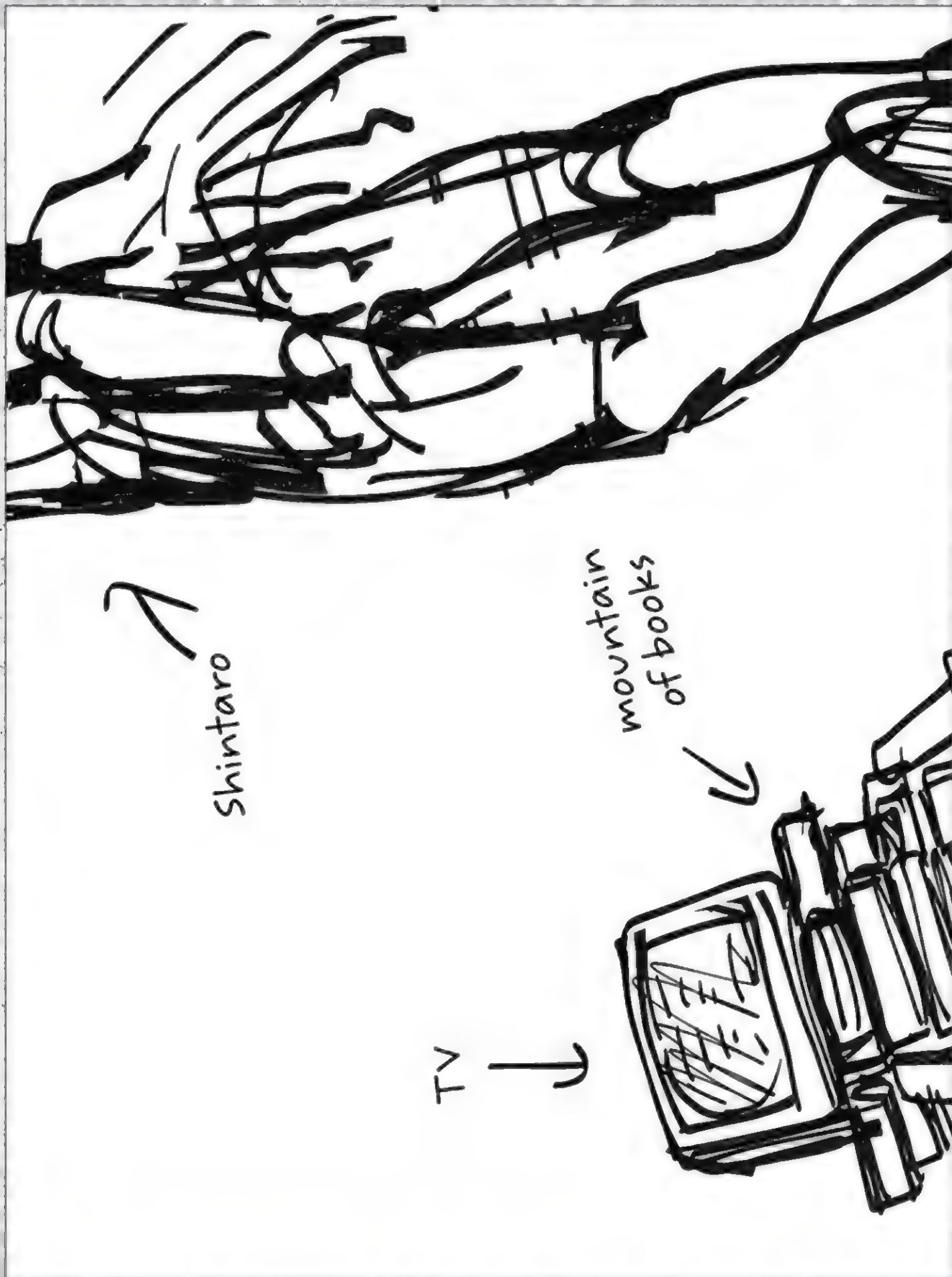
My stomach
is growling.

Sidu





Cover Illustration Sketch



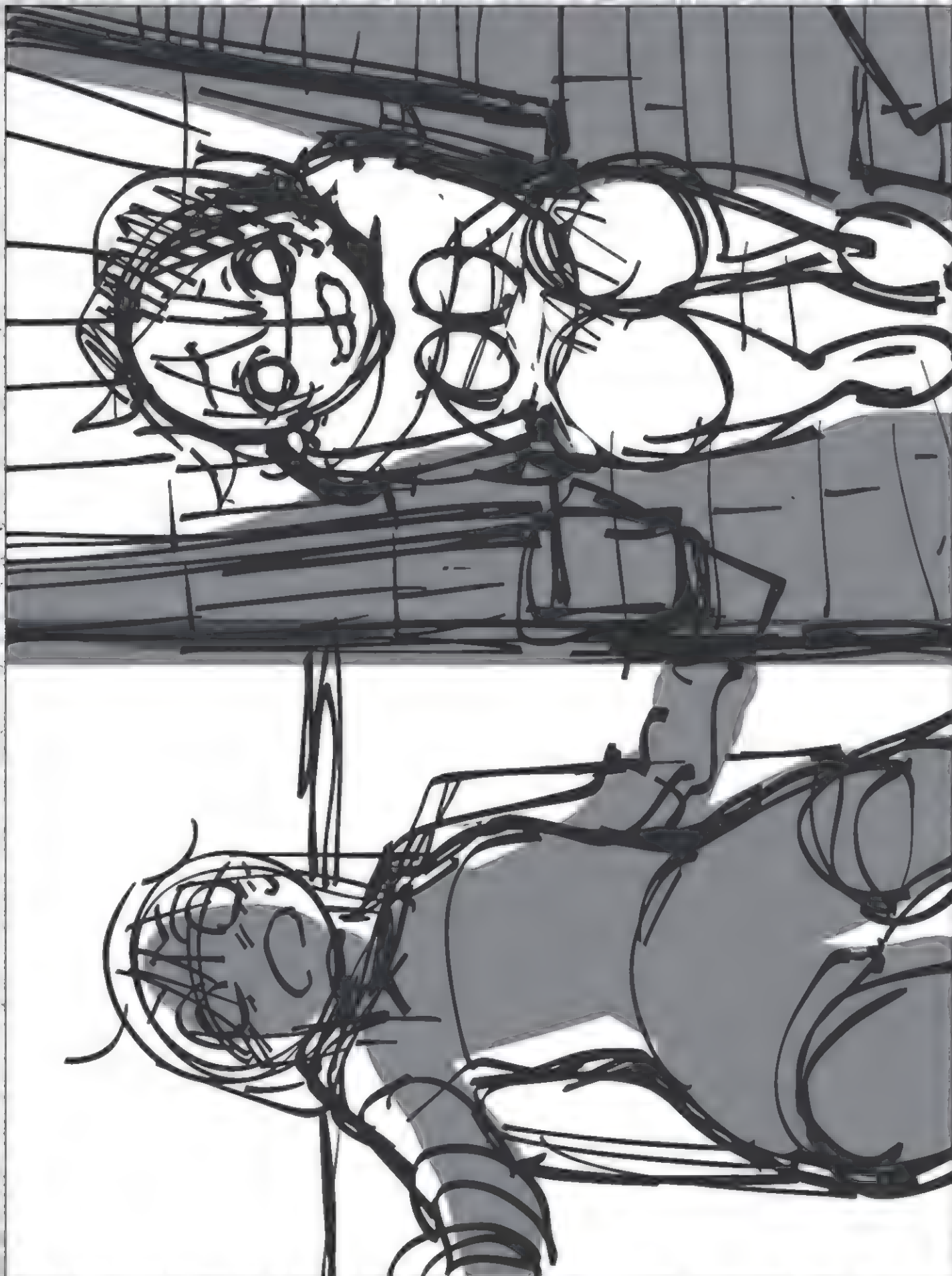
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Illustration 1 Sketch



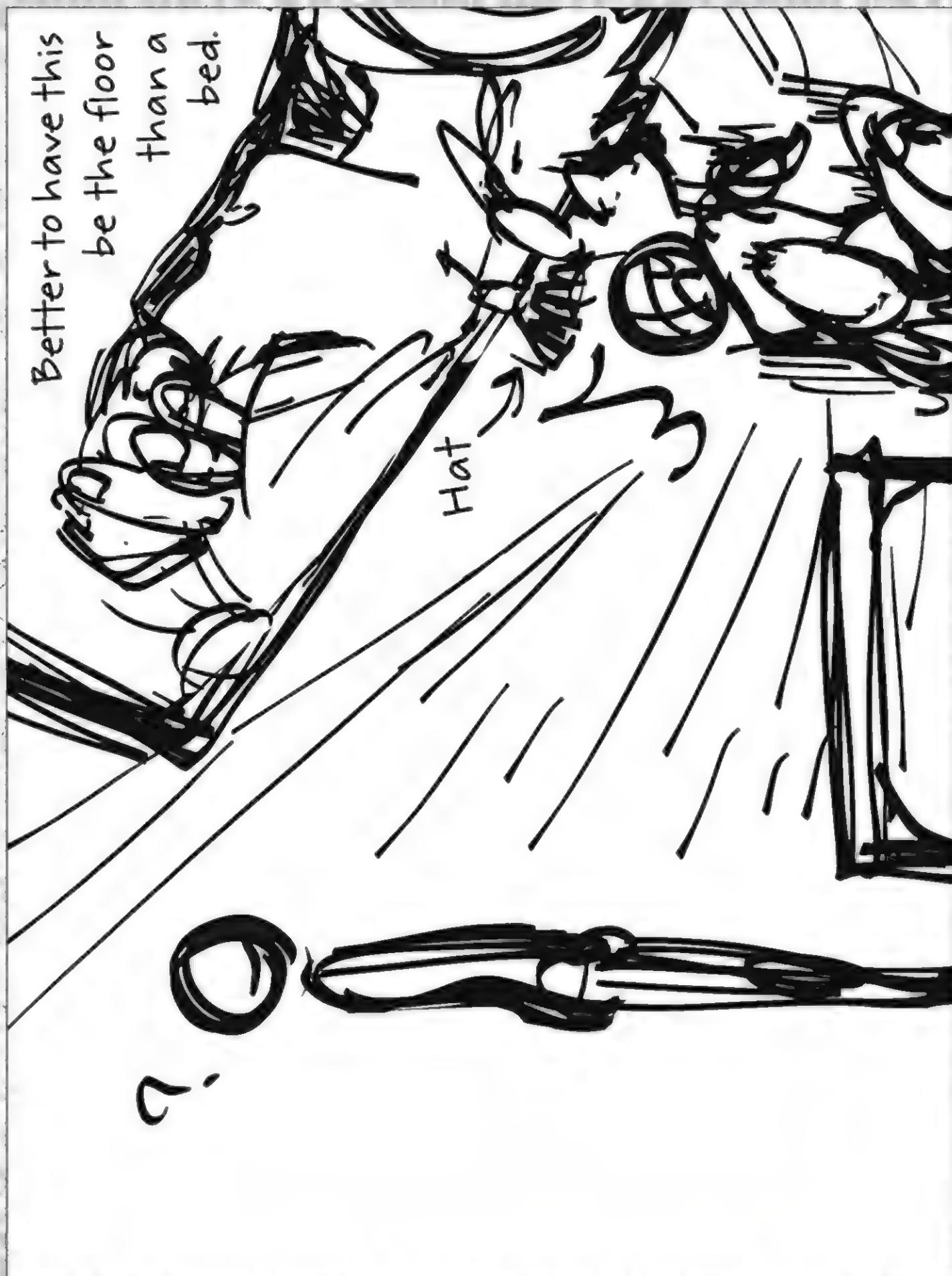
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Illustration 2 Sketch



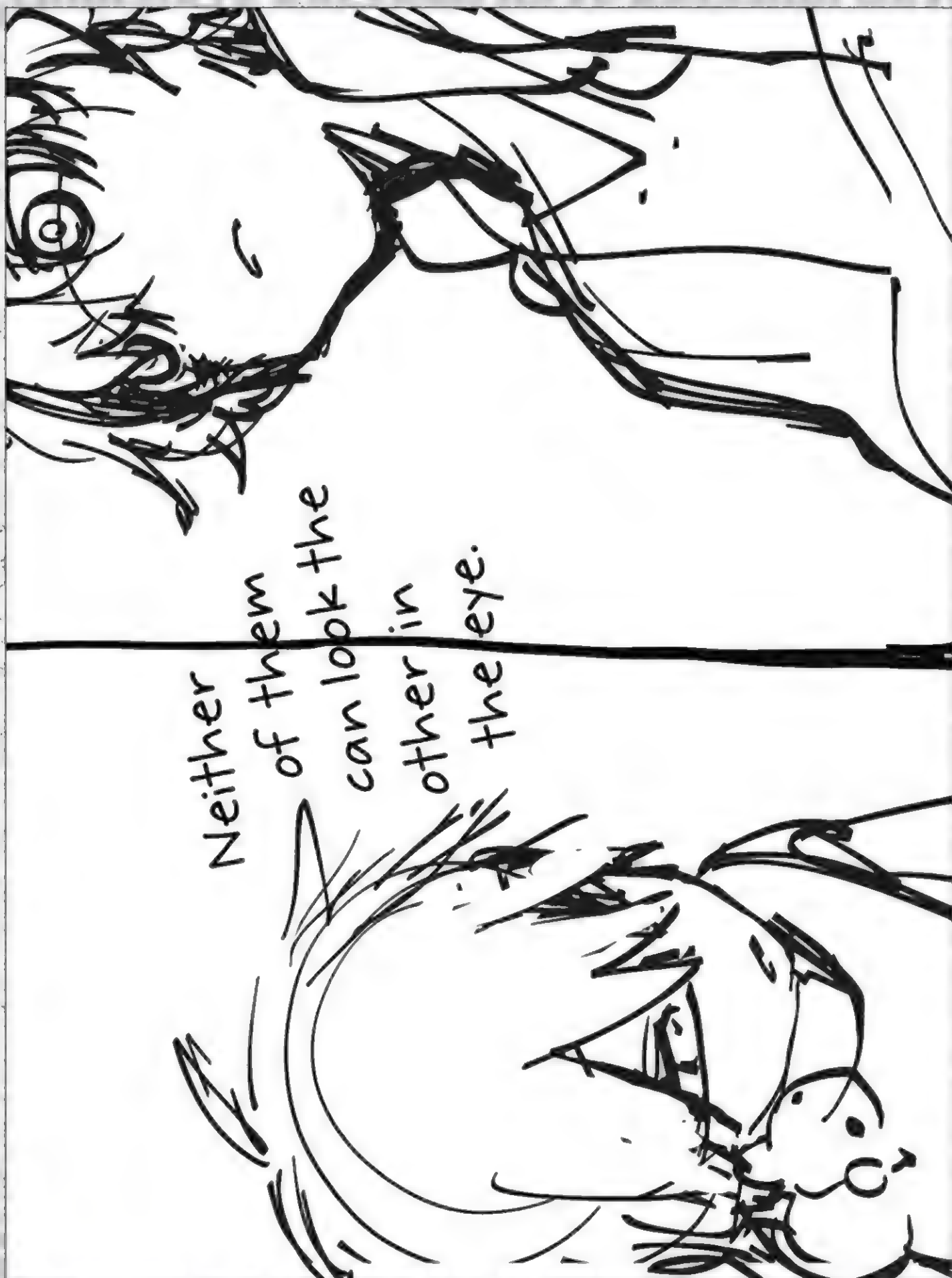
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Illustration 3 Sketch



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Illustration 4 Sketch



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Illustration 5 Sketch



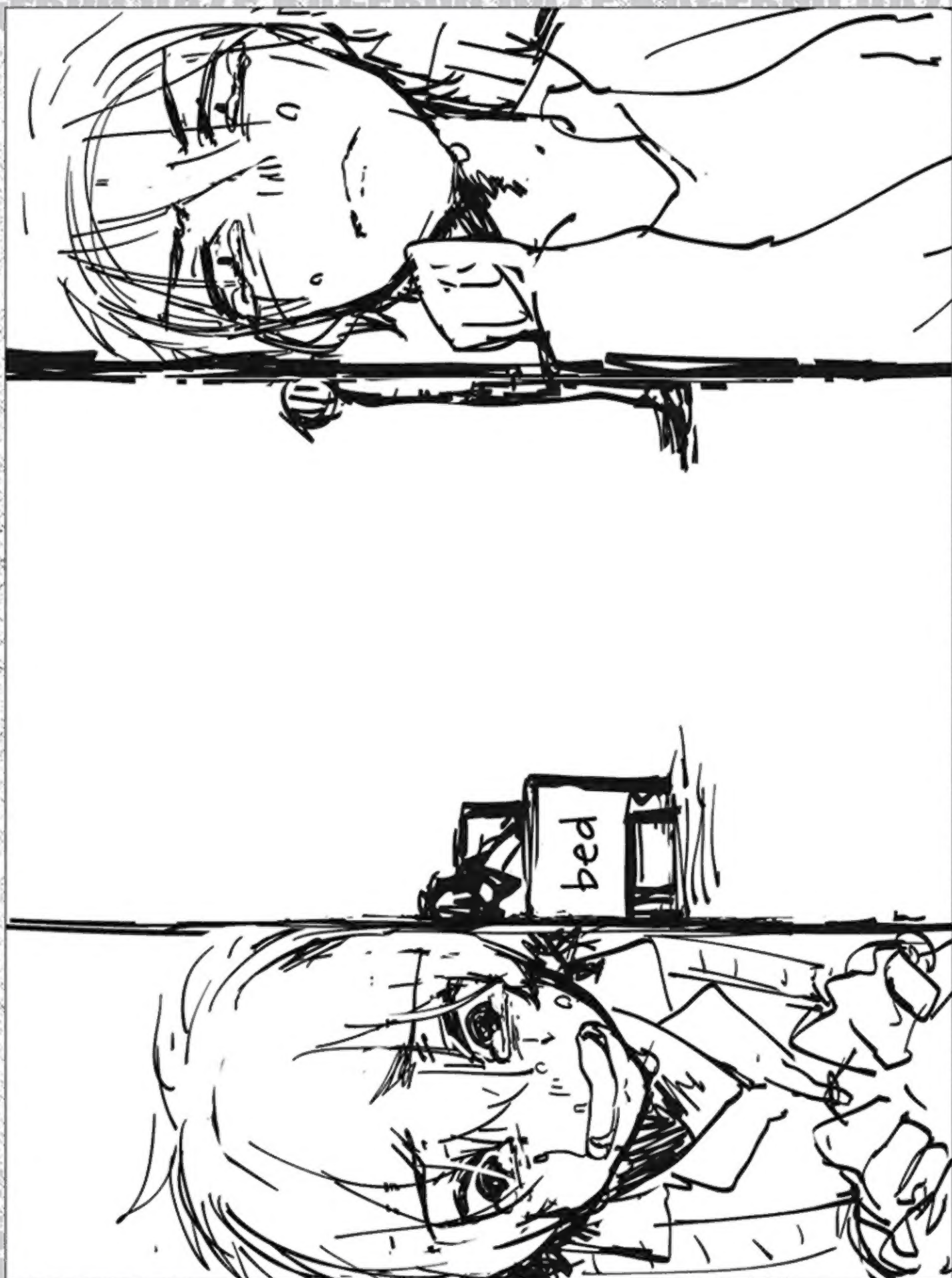
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Illustration 6 Sketch



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Illustration 7 Sketch



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Illustration 8 Sketch



Illustration 9 Sketch